

# What is the conscience? What is conscientious objection?

What is the conscience? How does it act, and how is conscience formed? What is conscientious objection? Some questions and answers about the "interior space of dialogue" between God and man.

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"The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord, searching all the innermost parts of our being" (Proverbs 20:27).

## **Summary**

1. What is the conscience?
2. How does the conscience act?
3. How is the conscience formed?
4. Conscience and truth
5. Conscience and freedom
6. What is conscientious objection?

"When the pagans, who do not have the Law, guided by nature, fulfill the prescriptions of the Law, even though they do not have the Law, they are a law unto themselves, and show that what is commanded by the Law is inscribed in their hearts. This is proved by the testimony of their own conscience, which sometimes accuses them and sometimes excuses

them, until the Day when God will judge the hidden intentions of men through Christ Jesus, according to the Good News that I preach" (Letter to the Romans 2:14-16).

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## **1. What is the conscience?**

Conscience is the interior space of dialogue between God and man. It is called *moral* conscience because through it, man identifies good and evil in his own life.

It is spoken of in two senses. In the comprehensive sense, it is the knowledge of good and evil that allows the person to make moral judgements about things and acts (the *habitual* conscience). In the strict sense, it is the practical judgment that acts to discern the goodness or evil of particular actions, one by one (the *actual* conscience) (cf. *Chosen in*

*Christ to be Saints*, Enrique Colom and Ángel Rodríguez Luño, pg. 303).

In short, "conscience is the unique witness of what happens in the intimate center of man, a witness of his own faithfulness or unfaithfulness with regard to the law, of his essential moral rectitude or iniquity. The conscience establishes an intimate dialogue within man himself, but more profoundly there is found in it a dialogue of man with God, the author of the law" (*Chosen in Christ to be Saints*, pg. 309).

The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* affirms that 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" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16).

In Pope Francis' words: "Conscience is the interior space for listening to the truth, to the good, to God; it is the interior place of my relationship with him, which speaks to my heart and helps me to discern, to understand the path I must follow, and once I have made my decision, to go forward, to remain faithful" (Angelus, June 30, 2013).

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- Ask the Lord to grant you all the sensitivity you need to realise how evil venial sin is, so as to recognise it as an outright and fundamental enemy of your soul, and, with God's grace, to avoid it. (*The Forge*, 114)
- I agree. You acted badly, out of weakness. — But what I fail to understand is how, with a clear conscience, you have not repented. You cannot do something wrong and then say,

or think, that it is something holy, or that it is of no importance. (*The Forge*, 164)

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## 2. How does the conscience act?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that the moral conscience is present in the interior of each person and acts at the right moment, ordering him or her to do good and avoid evil. When a person is faced with different options in his actions, conscience judges the goodness or evil of all of them and calls to choose the good, to which man is attracted because it is linked to his true happiness. "When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1777).

This implies that man has an obligation to follow what his

conscience dictates. He is also obliged to form it in such a way that its dictates are right judgments that bring him closer to the true good. The Catechism goes on: "Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1786).

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- Inquisitive people asked you whether you judged that decision of yours, which they considered indifferent, to be good or bad. And, with a sure conscience, you answered: "I know only two things: that my intention is honest... and that I know how much it cost me." And you added: "God is the reason and the purpose of my

life, that is why I am convinced that nothing can be indifferent." (*Furrow*, 583)

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### **3. How is the conscience formed?**

"Man has been made by God to participate in this law, with the result that [...] he can come to perceive ever more fully the truth that is unchanging. Wherefore every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3)

Among the practical measures man can take to form a conscience that comes to right judgements are: moral and religious formation, friendship and counsel from well-informed

persons, the practice of virtues that facilitate choosing the good, and prayer, which is dialogue with God. It is important to recognize the role our friendships and the environments in which we choose to abide play in forming the conscience: they contribute positively to its formation if we find in them a sincere desire to seek the common and personal good; or deform it if, on the contrary, they encourage bad decisions that generate personal or social harm.

With regard to these means, Church document *Dignitatis Humanae* invites us to seek the truth "in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction," including in the teachings of the Church, and "communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have

discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it." (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3)

To the degree that man strives to attain a conscience formed by these means, his conscience will have more light and clarity to discern and act more uprightly in the concrete and unique situations in which, due to his freedom, he finds himself.

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- Student: form yourself in a solid and active piety, be outstanding in study, have a strong desire for the 'professional' apostolate. And with that vigour of your religious and professional training, I promise you rapid and far-reaching developments. (*The Way*, 346)

## 4. Conscience and truth

Pope Francis invites us to listen more to our conscience, while warning: "Beware! This does not mean to follow one's own self, to do what interests me, what suits me, what I feel like doing.... It is not this!" (Pope Francis, Angelus, June 30, 2013)

What, then, is the relationship between conscience and truth? In the depths of his conscience," affirms the Second Vatican Council, "man discovers a law which he does not give himself, but which he must obey and whose voice resounds, when necessary, in the ears of his heart, always calling him to love and to do good and to avoid evil: do this, avoid that. For man has a law written by God in his heart, in obedience to which lies human dignity and

according to which he will be judged" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 54).

## Meditate with St. Josemaría

- *Sancta Maria, Sedes Sapientiae*
    - Holy Mary, Seat of Wisdom.
    - Invoke Our Mother often in that way, so that she may fill her children, in their study, work and social relations, with the Truth that Christ has brought to us. (*Furrow*, 607)
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## 5. Conscience and freedom

To the extent that man forms his conscience and gets to know the law inscribed by God in his heart, he also knows the truth to which he is called. Profound knowledge of this truth makes him freer. Jesus, in his time on earth, lived in constant dialogue with his Father. Thus he knew the Father's

Will and followed it, even to the point of giving his life on the Cross. The Gospels show us Jesus' Passion as a free choice, made out of love, the consequence of discovering the Will of the Father and recognizing its goodness.

"Jesus wants us to be free, and where does this freedom take place? It is done in dialogue with God in one's own conscience. If a Christian does not know how to speak with God, does not know how to hear God in his own conscience: he is not free, he is not free" (Pope Francis, Angelus, June 30, 2013).

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- We have learned with gratitude, because it makes us realise the happiness we are being called to, that all creatures have been created out of nothing by God and for God: both men, who are rational creatures, although we

so often act unreasonably, and the irrational beings who roam the surface of the earth, or burrow in its inmost recesses, or sail the azure skies — some soaring so high that they come face to face with the sun. But in all this wonderful variety, it is only we men (I am not referring now to the angels) who can unite ourselves to the Creator by using our freedom. We are in a position to give him, or deny him, the glory that is his due as the Author of everything that exists.

- This possibility makes up the light and shade of human freedom. Our Lord invites us, urges us to choose the good, so tenderly does he love us! 'See, today I set before you a choice between life and death, good and evil. If you pay heed to the commandments of Yahweh your God which I command you

this day, by loving Yahweh your God, by walking in his ways and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live... Choose life, that you may live.'

- Ask yourself now (I too am examining my conscience) whether you are holding firmly and unshakably to your choice of Life? When you hear the most lovable voice of God urging you on to holiness, do you freely answer 'Yes'? Let us turn our gaze once more to Jesus, as he speaks to the people in the towns and countryside of Palestine. He doesn't want to force himself upon us. 'If you have a mind to be perfect...', he says to the rich young man. The young man refused to take the hint, and the Gospel goes on to say: *abiit tristis*, he went away forlorn. That is why I have

sometimes called him the 'sad lad'. He lost his happiness because he refused to hand over his freedom to God. (*Friends of God*, 24)

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## 6. What is conscientious objection?

Out of respect for man's conscience and human dignity, every person has the right and obligation to follow his own conscience even when a civil law prohibits it. The declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* on religious freedom affirms that "man perceives and recognizes through his conscience the dictates of divine law; a conscience which he is obliged to follow faithfully in all his activity in order to reach God, who is his end. Therefore, he cannot be forced to act against his conscience... Nor can he be prevented from acting according

to his conscience..." (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3).

## Meditate with St. Josemaría

- Freedom of conscience: no! How many evils this lamentable error, which permits actions against the dictates that lie deepest in oneself, has brought about in nations and individuals. Freedom 'of consciences,' yes: for it means the duty to follow that interior command... ah, but after receiving a serious formation! (*Furrow*, 389)
- Throughout my years as a priest, whenever I have spoken, or rather shouted, about my love for personal freedom, I have noticed some people reacting with distrust, as if they suspected that my defence of freedom could endanger the faith. Such faint-hearted people

can rest assured. The only freedom that can assail the faith is a misinterpreted freedom, an aimless freedom, one without objective principles, one that is lawless and irresponsible. In a word, licence. Unfortunately, this is what some people are advocating, and their claim does indeed constitute a threat to the faith.

- This is why it is inaccurate to speak of freedom of conscience, thereby implying that it may be morally right for someone to reject God. We have already seen that it is in our power to oppose God's plans for salvation. It is in our power, but we should not do so. If someone adopted this attitude deliberately, he would be sinning, by breaking the first and most important of the commandments: 'Thou shalt

love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.'

- I defend with all my strength the freedom of consciences, which means that no one can licitly prevent a man from worshipping God. The legitimate hunger for truth must be respected. Man has a grave obligation to seek God, to know him and worship him, but no one on earth is permitted to impose on his neighbour the practice of a faith he lacks; just as no one can claim the right to harm those who have received the faith from God. (*Friends of God*, 32)