



# Conscience

THE IRISH CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

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# 'So long as you're sincere...'

The story is told of a man who had a reputation as a bit of a know-all. 'Tell us', they asked him, 'were you ever wrong about anything?' 'Yes', he replied, 'there was one occasion when I could have sworn I had made a mistake, but then it turned out that I hadn't.'

Making mistakes, even about very important things, is part of everybody's experience. When we approach an important decision – about choosing a career, let's say, or about whether to emigrate – we go to great lengths to try to ensure that we make the right choice. No matter how well we think it through, the niggling worry remains that it might turn out to be a mistake. Everyone knows the experience of looking back regretfully on decisions taken after the most serious reflection and saying to themselves, 'If only I had realised...'

It is important to be honest with ourselves. 'So long as you're sincere', we say, 'that's what counts'. From one point of view that is perfectly true. Once we have honestly decided what is the right thing to do, it would be reprehensible to do the opposite. Everyone is obliged to do what they believe to be right.

What the sincere person is trying hard to do is to make the correct decision, the decision that best faces the real issues and best reflects the real situation, the decision that won't turn out to have been a mistake. To be sincere means being honestly convinced that we have made every effort to ensure that we are doing the right thing.

The fact that a wrong decision was made in all sincerity may be little consolation to someone who was harmed by it. Nor does sincerity provide immunity from the damage that a mistake may do to ourselves. The only consolation is that one of the most important ways of learning is by recognising our mistakes.

The phrase, 'You must follow your conscience', means that we should do what we honestly believe to be right. It does not guarantee that we will still believe it was right when we look back on it. It does not mean that our friends, people directly affected, or other observers, have to agree that the decision is wise or just or helpful.

Being sincere  
is not the same  
as being correct.

The person who is honestly searching for the truth knows that very well. That is why he or she does not stop at asking, 'Am I being honest?' The sincere person is someone who is trying to answer the question, 'Am I making the right decision?'

'What right  
have you to  
judge?'

Many would say, 'If he thinks it's right, then it's right for him; if she is sincere, it's not for anyone else to question her decision.' Hence the challenge, 'What right have you to judge?'

The challenge is well founded. Only God can judge the heart of a person. No matter how familiar we are with someone, we never fully know how a particular decision appeared to them, what factors weighed most heavily, what angles they saw or failed to see, how they understood or misunderstood the moral issues, how aware they were of risks which seem obvious in hindsight, what constraints they acted under, both from within themselves and from outside.

In a sense, each decision is unique. Nobody can ever know with certainty that another was insincere or irresponsible. However much the decision harms the person who made it, however much it angers or disturbs others, it remains possible that the person was doing the best they could in the circumstances to discover the truth and to act accordingly.

We have no right to judge another person. Only God can do that and, 'God does not see as human beings see; they look at appearances, but Yahweh looks at the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7). The search for the truth is ultimately the search for God who created the universe. To have a sincere conscience means that we have searched for, and responded to the call of God to the best of our ability.

On the other hand, there is nothing disrespectful in

wondering about the rightness or wrongness of the decision a person has reached. Indeed it is part of recognising that the whole of humanity is involved in a common 'search for truth and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships' (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World* 16).

Every person's decisions affect others in some way; they certainly affect the person who makes them. Is it not natural to wonder whether it affects them for the better or for the worse? What kind of world would it be if no one was allowed to have any convictions about the right way for human beings to behave when they are confronted with particular kinds of choices in case it might disturb those who had chosen differently?

That does not mean that we have no right to believe that a person has made the wrong decision – a belief which, after all, they may come to share with us at a later date.

We are not the final judge of whether another person is sincere or insincere.

Is it not reasonable to think that, seeing another person facing a difficult decision, we should ask

ourselves what we would do in a similar situation? How much of literature would survive if that question were not permitted?

Even when it comes to decisions that seem to affect no one else, why should it be wrong to ask ourselves whether we would do the same?

We do not inhabit separate universes. Your right to your good name corresponds to my duty to respect it; my right not to be violently assaulted corresponds to your duty not to assault me. No community could survive if we operated on the basis that one of us may feel free to ignore such obligations.

Sometimes people think about the Catholic vision of morality (see sections 6, 7) as if it were concerned with condemning and denouncing people. This is a distortion of the truth. It is not a matter of condemning people but of clarifying the issues involved in particular kinds of decisions.



The late George Burns said, 'If you can fake sincerity, you've got it made'. It is a cynical comment, and an uncomfortable one.

'How do I know I am being sincere?'

Sometimes it seems that the easiest person to convince is myself, especially when it suits me to be convinced.

Some of the ways of convincing ourselves are common enough: 'Everybody is doing it.' [In other words, I thought this was wrong, but since so many respectable people are doing it, it can't be that bad.] 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.' [I know that I am doing wrong, but my motives are good and the result will be worth it.] 'I'll have to give it more consideration.' [I know I should do this unpleasant task, but if I delay long enough someone else might save me the trouble.]

Another way is more subtle. It consists in rehearsing the issues over and over again and becoming more and more convinced of the line of argument that we have decided to defend. Coming

to the decision we want to reach can be easier than we like to admit.

We must do what we sincerely believe to be right but how we came to that sincere belief may be questionable. Sincerity is a serious, ongoing task.

Sometimes the convictions which we like to think are reasonable and balanced are nothing more than the product of our prejudices. An opinion expressed by a person we like and admire may be treated with respect and approval, whereas the very same view expressed by someone we dislike may be dismissed.



# The voice of conscience

We talk about 'the voice of conscience'. That can be a misleading way of looking at it. It may suggest that we only have to sit there passively and wait for our conscience to speak. In fact, 'conscience is a judgement of reason' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1778).

Conscience is not merely  
somebody whispering  
in my ear; it is not just a  
feeling or an instinct.  
It is my judgement of what is  
the best thing to do in a  
particular situation.

The judgement is not just about how I feel. Sometimes a person may feel no guilt about a proposed action, but someone else might feel equally strongly that it wrongs them.

The judgement is not just about whether the action causes more happiness than pain – sometimes a large number of people can be happy at the mistreatment of an individual or a minority.

The judgement is not just about what the action achieves, but about what it means, what it says. In every action I say something about the kind of person I wish to be and the kind of values I choose to live by. In every action I say something about how I regard the people most directly involved – as people whose dignity is equal to my own, or as beings I may use or manipulate. The first question a conscience judgement seeks to answer is whether what this action says is true. Does what it says about me express the truth about my own dignity? Does what it says about others express the truth about their dignity?

The phrase 'the voice of conscience' does express an important insight. In the deepest recesses of every human being, God is present. There, in their own hearts, people decide their 'own destiny in the sight of God' (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 14).

In deciding our own destiny – the direction of our lives and the values by which we will try to live – we are responding to God. That is the significance of human freedom. Our choices are not simply decisions to do or not to do certain things. Within those choices, as their inner meaning, we decide what kind of people we wish to be – generous or mean, kind or cruel, honest or dishonest. We decide whether we are going to respect the dignity of other people. We decide whether we are committed to what is good and true. We decide to accept or reject God's love for us and God's claims on us.

We begin to understand the seriousness of our

moral responsibility when we recognise that, in every choice we make, we are responding, positively or negatively, to God. Our conscience judgement is, in that sense, a voice – the voice of the Father who invites us to be his people, of the incarnate Son who calls us to follow him, of the Holy Spirit who guides us into the complete truth.

We live in times when it is not easy to hear 'the still, small voice' of God (1 Kings 19:12). God is within us, 'more inward than my innermost self'. But we need to be sufficiently present to ourselves if we are to hear his voice (CCC 300, 1779). The seriousness of our choices is fully appreciated when we recognise that they are a response to the infinitely loving God and the gift of eternal, endless life which he offers.



## 'I'll make up my own mind.'

When I come to make up my own mind, I am not being very wise if I think I have nothing to learn from anyone else. In most areas of life we find ourselves listening to others and depending on their experience and their wisdom. A person wishing to turn on the radio does not feel the need to conduct all the experiments and research which went into the invention and development of broadcasting. He or she assumes all that and goes ahead from there.

Similarly, when I have to make a difficult moral decision, I do not act as if I were the first person who ever had a problem like this. I am influenced by the example of other people, by the values and virtues I have seen in my family and friends, by the traditions of the community in which I grew up, by the lives and convictions of people who share my moral outlook and my religious beliefs. I need to look honestly at all the things that can help me to come to a right decision. In other words, I have an inescapable responsibility to inform my conscience.

For the most part, this context within which we live and decide is a positive thing. There are dark moments in the history of Christianity and of Europe. There are failures in the lives of even the most admirable people. But there are also achievements and insights which no individual would have reached by him/herself. We think of the growth of the concept of human rights in this century or the development of the idea of equality before the law.



Nowadays people tend to think of tradition as something which is hidebound and restricting. In fact, if we look at it openly, we may find that it challenges us to respond to our situation with courage and creativity as our ancestors so often did to theirs.

This context which we have inherited is an ally of freedom. Excessive individualism is not.

Being aware of how an issue  
appears to my friends, how  
other people in my  
community, past and present,  
have understood it, helps me  
to make the best, most  
informed decision.

Because this tradition is my tradition, part of what I am, it is painful when I discover myself in conflict with it. It is precisely because we share the same fundamental outlook that I want those closest to me to understand and agree with my decision.

'I don't need  
the Church  
to tell  
me what to  
do!'

When it comes to the Church there is a tendency to see its moral vision and ideals not as helpful advice but as restrictive regulations. How many people, one wonders, at the back of their minds, think something like, 'Isn't it well for people who are not Catholics; they don't have to worry about all these rules?'

There is something puzzling about such an attitude. If people think that what the Church says about these matters is false why does it concern them at all? If they think it is true, surely they cannot think that it is better not to know the truth!

Perhaps they believe that these are simply rules which could just as easily say something different. 'I try my best to do what they tell me, but why on earth don't they change the rules to make them less demanding?'

The problem is that anyone who thinks that it is all about rules misses the point. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that the Commandments come in the second place. What comes first is God's love and our response – loving God with all our heart and soul and might and our neighbour as ourselves (CCC 2062, 2055).

Down through the centuries, Christians who wanted to love God and their neighbour with all their hearts faced many different situations. They found themselves wondering how they should express the love of God and neighbour faced with this conflict or that complication.

# The rules of Christian morality are really the answers of those Christians and their communities to the questions they faced.

They concluded that, 'In this sort of situation you should do this; in that sort of dilemma you should do that.' It is not that popes and bishops sat in their offices trying to think of things that would make life difficult. It was that the followers of Jesus searched for the right answers to the question of how a Christian should live. And in their search they relied on the help of the Holy Spirit (see section 10) who, as Jesus promised, would lead them into the whole truth.

Jesus described himself as 'the Way' (John 14:6). His earliest followers described themselves, and their first communities, as 'the Way'. Christianity is a way of life.

It is the task of parents to be the first heralds of that Good News to their children and of teachers to assist them in that task. The whole community of Christ's followers is involved in sharing the Good News and the way of life which they have received.

In doing so they are sharing a long tradition, stretching over two millennia. During those centuries saints, canonised and uncanonised, lived as followers of Jesus; Christian thinkers and mystics, founders of religious congregations left a wealth of insight, written and unwritten; people whose names are long forgotten and great martyrs gave witness to their commitment in heroic lives and deaths; the faith of generations of parents lives on in their descendants.

It is the particular task of bishops, priests and deacons, as leaders appointed for the community, to teach the Good News of Christ and its implications for the way we live, faithful to the word of God, drawing on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and on the whole Christian tradition.



## ‘Why should I listen to the Church?’

Sometimes it is desirable or necessary that the wisdom which is part of the heritage of the people of Christ should be clearly formulated so that people can see the implications of that heritage for particular decisions they face. It has been clearly and consistently recognised throughout the history of the Catholic Church that the responsibility of formulating that teaching has been given by Jesus Christ to the Pope and the bishops.

Sometimes the responsibility is exercised tentatively when it deals with the application of Gospel values in complex contexts. One example is the economy. The values are clear but their application is not. Thus, the Introduction to the pastoral letter, *Work is the Key* (1992), says: ‘What follows will betray a sympathy for certain approaches. Some people may legitimately prefer others. We would not, even if we could, propose a blueprint for job creation and income redistribution for our competence is religious and, therefore, ethical and human, not economic.’

Sometimes that responsibility is exercised solemnly and with great authority when it deals with a principle which is clear and fundamental. This happened most recently when Pope John Paul declared: ‘By the authority which Christ conferred on Peter and his successors, and in communion with the bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral’ (*Evangelium vitae* 57).

Such solemn teaching is not just an expression of opinion on the part of the Pope and bishops. It

expresses the tradition by which the Church, ‘in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes’ (Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 8). It is not just a question of reflecting the consensus of the views of members of the Church today. It is a question of being faithful to a message which is God’s message and to a Church which extends not only across the continents but across the centuries.

The reason why that teaching ought to be heard is not because of the learning or the wisdom or the expertise or the human qualities that the Pope or the bishops may have.

The teaching of the Pope  
and the bishops ought to be  
heard because it is based on  
the teaching of Jesus Christ  
who gave them the  
responsibility to teach the  
community in his name.

It ought to be heard because of his promise that the Holy Spirit would be with them in that task: 'Anyone who listens to you listens to me' (Luke 10:16). The Spirit is present in the whole community. In a particular way those who are called to be leaders and teachers rely on the presence and enlightenment of the Spirit.

Those leaders are very conscious nowadays of the fact that people, as Pope Paul VI put it, listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers and if they do listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses (*Evangelisation Today* 41).

The Christian way of life is the effort to respond to what a wholehearted love of God and neighbour demands of us. And the demands of wholehearted love are at least as challenging and at least as insistent for popes and bishops as they are for anybody else. Indeed, the word of God challenges first of all the one who is called to proclaim it.

The Catholic Church has been given a mandate to teach authoritatively. The Pope or the bishops cannot compel anyone to agree with them. Authority is not dictatorship; it appeals to the consciences of people to accept that what it says is true.

## 'Is anybody listening?'

It is worth reflecting on why it is that fewer and fewer people appear to be listening to what the Church is saying on many issues.

This phenomenon does not affect the Catholic Church alone. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes 'a profound redrawing of our moral landscape' whereby 'sin becomes immorality, immorality becomes deviance, deviance becomes choice, and all choice becomes legitimate' (*The Persistence of Faith*, London, 1991, p. 50).

The discussion of moral questions has become frustrating. There is a hopeless air to debates about issues such as abortion, euthanasia and so on. It is often obvious that minds are not meeting and that there is no prospect of agreement.

One fundamental reason why such differences can arise is that some of the things we take for granted in our moral debates are not really the case.

We assume that we are all speaking the same language and trying to answer the same questions, but very often we are not.

We can see these different languages and questions at work, for instance, in the debate about euthanasia. One person favours euthanasia saying, 'If I were in pain with no hope of being restored to health, I would feel that it was not worth continuing and would wish my suffering to be ended.' Another person agrees, 'If one can end someone's pain that is the humane thing to do because it reduces the amount of pain in the world and gives a measure of peace to the relatives who have had to bear this awful burden.'

It sounds as though they are making the same point, but they are looking in different directions. One is looking at his or her own feelings; the other is calculating which outcome will bring the greatest happiness or freedom from pain all round. These two approaches do not always lead to the same conclusion.

On the other side of the argument, there may be a person who refuses even to discuss euthanasia because it is against the law of God. Someone else might oppose euthanasia but want to discuss the matter in terms of the value of human life and the implications of concluding that any human life is no longer worth living and should be deliberately ended.

The latter two approaches should yield the same result. The law of God in no way diminishes the dignity that God has given to humanity. It often happens, however, that the questions we face today are not the same as those that existed when the Scriptures were written. We are faced with new

ways of postponing the moment of death, with disagreements about how one can determine precisely when death has occurred.

The answers to these problems are found in reasoned judgement which weighs up the relevant factors: 'Is this life already ended?' 'In ending this procedure might we simply be recognising that there is no more that can usefully be done by way of medical treatment for this patient?'

Through reflection, a person's conscience comes to a judgement about how to act in the way that recognises the dignity of human life and the absolute prohibition on deliberately ending a human life.



## 'Don't be absolutist'

One of the great crimes in a world which likes to think that everybody's opinion can be regarded as equally valid is, apparently, to be 'absolutist'. Anybody who believes that deliberate abortion is always wrong is likely to be called an absolutist or a fundamentalist.

The idea that there is no moral truth, that one person's opinion is as true as anyone else's, seems initially attractive. But something in us wants to believe that a moral argument is not like a discussion about whether custard has a pleasant taste. The latter discussion is meaningless – some people like custard, others do not, and that is the end of the matter. But the statement that abortion is a violation of the right to life of a human being must be either true or false. It cannot be true for some people but not for others.

One can feel pushed towards the nonsensical conclusion that the answer could be different for different people by the recognition that concerned human beings, clearly motivated by compassion, come to opposite conclusions about it.

To speak of 'duty', 'fundamental rights', 'ought', 'ought not', implies an obligation which is absolute, the same for everyone.

In some cases there are exceptions to the rule. It is wrong to take food that belongs to another person, but a person who would otherwise starve to death is entitled to take food which belongs to someone else.

Sometimes there are no exceptions. The direct taking of innocent life is always wrong. That does not mean that we may never do anything, such as driving a car, which might conceivably result in someone's death. What the word 'direct' implies is that killing another person may never be what we set out to do, nor may it even be a means of achieving what we set out to do.

The right to life is not the right to live for ever; it is the right not to be deliberately killed. To say that something is absolutely wrong means that if anyone chooses to do it he or she has acted immorally.

The word 'absolutist' may sound unattractive, but in some circumstances it can be another word for 'hero'. Throughout history people have been prepared to die because they believed that their moral obligations were absolute. We call them martyrs. The word is used in a loose sense to refer to those who die for a cause. It is used in Christian tradition, to describe those who witness to Christ by accepting death rather than deny the truth of his Gospel.

## Walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:16)

Absolute moral obligations, the call to love of God and neighbour with our whole heart and soul and might, may seem unreasonable demands to make on us human beings with all our limitations and all the varied calls upon our attention.

The Holy Spirit is given to us so that we may see what hope God's call holds for us, how rich is the glory of the heritage he offers (Ephesians 1: 18). The life God promises, a life already growing within us, is worth every effort of which we are capable. The goal is greater than we can imagine.

The Holy Spirit is present in each individual, 'a gentle guest and friend who inspires, guides, corrects and strengthens' the new life in Christ (CCC 1697). That is why, for the Christian, coming to a conscience judgement is not just an effort of reasoning, it is a prayer.

What the Christian conscience ultimately seeks is to be in harmony with the plan of God through which the Holy Spirit is renewing the face of the earth.

The Holy Spirit is present in the whole Church, in Christ's followers today and in the Christians of

other times, in the experience of individuals and in the example they have left us. The Spirit is also present in the teaching of the Church through which we learn the implications of the vision lived by so many people in so many varied situations.

We need to understand that the whole Gospel, including its uncompromising moral demands, is Good News. "Those who live "by the flesh" experience God's Law as a burden, and indeed as a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom. On the other hand, those who are impelled by love and "walk by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16), and who desire to serve others, find in God's Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practise love as something freely chosen and freely lived out' (Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* 18).

That is why conscience is so important.

Conscience is the secret core of a person.

(cf. Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World* 16)

Conscience is the heart, the place of decision, the place of truth, the place of encounter with God.

(cf. CCC 2563)

Conscience is the way in which we seek and find the truth that makes us free.

(cf. John 8:32)

## Some texts

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### conscience

It often happens that conscience goes astray through ignorance which it is unable to avoid, without thereby losing its dignity. This cannot be said of a person who takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is gradually almost blinded through the habit of committing sin. (cf. Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World* 16)

In speaking of conscience, the impression may easily be given that it is something separate from the human person – a kind of voice from outside. Help does come from outside: from other people, from the Church, from God himself directly; but the judgement of conscience is made as the individual person brings the light of intelligence to bear on a particular moral issue with which he or she is faced. (*Conscience and Morality*, Irish Bishops, 1980, no. 2)

Their conscience is people's most secret core and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths. (cf. Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World* 16)

It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1779)

Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Law-giver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. (Cardinal Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*)

For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself. (Vatican II, *Decree on Religious Liberty* 14)

The judgement of conscience... is a judgement which applies to a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil... Conscience thus formulates *moral obligation* in the light of the natural law... The universality of the law and its obligation are acknowledged, not suppressed, once reason has established the law's application in concrete present circumstances. (John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* 59)

The guarantee that objective truth exists is found in God, who is Absolute Truth; objectively speaking, the search for truth and the search for God are one and the same. (Pope John Paul II, *Message for World Day of Peace* 1991)