

# CONSCIENCE AND ITS FORMATION: A CATHOLIC OVERVIEW



**Conscience:** *“Conscience represents both the more general ability we have as human beings to know what is good and right and the concrete judgments we make in particular situations concerning what we should do or about what we have already done....Conscience is that inner sanctuary in which we listen to the voice of God...”.*

(U.S. Catholic Catechism  
for Adults, p. 314)

## **Conscience is:**

- Who we are at the deepest level
- Prudent judgment of actions as compatible with the best of who we are
- Based on objective moral standards
- Always to be followed, if well-formed and certain
- Always a good, when well-formed, even if not always right

## **Conscience is not:**

- Feeling guilty or a lack of guilt
- A good angel on one shoulder telling us what to do and a bad angel on another tempting us to do what is wrong
- Simply one's subjective opinion or feeling
- Always certain; one can have a doubtful conscience
- Always right; one can at times follow one's conscience and make a morally wrong decision

**Formation of Conscience:** “Since we have the obligation to obey our conscience, we also have the great responsibility to see that it is formed in a way that reflects the true moral good.” (USCCA, p. 316). “A good conscience requires lifelong formation.



Each baptized follower of Christ is obliged to form his or her conscience according to objective moral standards. The Word of God is a principal tool in the formation of conscience when it is assimilated by study, prayer, and practice. The prudent advice and good example of others support and enlightens our conscience. The authoritative teachings of the Church

is an essential element in our conscience formation.” (USCCA, p. 314)



**Formation of Conscience:**

**DO**

- Get the best, objective and most accurate information on which to base a judgment
- Seek out the wisdom of God's Word, of Church teaching and practice, of wise and mature people
- Pray
- Think, reflect, study
- Seek to grow in maturity of conscience by looking at consequences of past actions
- Surround oneself with supportive environments of mature, loving, wise people.
- Trust actions that come from good habits (virtues) and healthy, fully integrated parts of our lives

**Formation of Conscience:**

**DO NOT**

- Presume you can make good decisions without the wisdom of others
- Simply act as everyone else is acting so as not to be different
- Make hasty decisions that can deeply affect you or others
- Stop learning, studying, seeking advice, growing in wisdom and maturity
- Separate oneself from communities and groups that exhibit good moral values
- Trust actions that come from bad habits (vices) or hurting, unhealed and fragile parts of our lives

*Reflection #1 The Call to Be a Disciple of Jesus*  
(cf. Luke 5:1-11, John 1:35-42, Mark 1:16-20, Matthew 4:18-24)

**A. Formation of Conscience is rooted in a conversion of our heart, a willingness to say yes to God as disciples of Jesus.**

1. We are on a journey that takes time; it is never over and done with. We never have everything perfectly integrated into our lives. We have to see ourselves in terms of the trajectory we are on: Is our heart basically oriented toward God or away from God? Too often we begin and end with the question "Is this action right or wrong?" rather than with the reflection "Am I a disciple or not? Am I willing to do what God asks of me?"

*Reflection #2: Do I want to be a disciple? To allow myself/my heart/my desires/my actions to be changed by my relationship to Jesus Christ and his people? Is my heart basically open or closed to God?*

2. If we are not willing or able to follow the Lord in some area(s) of our lives, then we cannot pray "What should I do, Lord?" Rather, we have to pray "Lord, change my heart to be willing to accept whatever is your way."

3. The struggle is to surrender in trust to God, all that we are, possess, want to hold control over. It does not mean that we will lose it; rather, that we are surrendering in trust to God. If we have surrendered to God, then we can better trust the peace or lack of peace deep in our hearts. God speaks in that peacefulness. On this level, there is really only one moral norm: "say 'yes' to God."

*Reflection #3: Mark 10:17-22. Put yourself in that scene and ask what it is that you hang onto, are unable to surrender to the Lord.*

**B. We help create a well-formed conscience by consistently allowing our actions to be guided by the wisdom of God (revelation), of the Church (its teaching and way of life) and of key others (persons of good judgment and good example, or who have expertise we need). We ask, read, study, reflect on and pray about this wisdom. We must involve not just our heart, but our head as well.**

1. How do we know we have formed our conscience so that we can trust the moral decisions we make? We look to and try to make our own the wisdom available on a given area/matter. We look to the **wisdom of God** by asking if God's Word and the revelation that comes from that Word has something clear to say on the matter. We look to the **wisdom of the Church** and its teachings to discover what our Tradition has come to understand about different areas of life.



Thirdly, we look to the **wisdom of others**: people who have lived exemplary lives, people we trust and respect, people who have a certain knowledge or expertise connected to the questions we are dealing with (doctors, lawyers, priests/pastoral ministers/spiritual directors, etc).

2. Such wisdom needs to be studied, reflected on, prayed about. Possible outcomes need to be weighed. The good of the whole community and our own selves need to be considered. In the end a well-formed conscience means that we have taken the time and made the effort to not just know the wisdom that is available but to reflect on and make that wisdom our own, for which we now take personal responsibility.

*Reflection #4: What motivates you to act responsibly? When a difficult decision needs to be made, what resources do you rely on, consult, draw upon? How do you make difficult decisions? What do you understand by the idea of "conscience"?*

3. Conscience truly understood—not feelings of guilt or lack of guilt, not just "it's my choice"—is the person's deepest sense of who they are as a moral agent and who God wants them to be. When that deep sense (called a "certain" conscience") is present, we must follow it for ourselves and respect it in others. We cannot violate our own or another's conscience. We must follow the conscience-level sense we have, if we have tried to form our consciences well. When we are not so certain (called a "doubtful conscience"), we need to do further reflection or trust the norms and wisdom of others we respect.

4. It is on this level that most of our moral norms come into play: the concrete negatively stated norms ("do not kill," "do not engage in premarital sexual relations," etc.) and the general positive norms ("be just," "be truthful," "be respectful," etc.). Norms enshrine the commu-

nity's wisdom on issues, protect values, signal certain dangers if they are violated. In this way they help form our consciences, guide our moral deliberations, open us up to the possibility that we are seeing an issue in too self-centered or limited a way. Norms, in other words, are not our conscience but rather are there to help form our consciences correctly. In the midst of uncertainty or confusion, they provide a beacon to guide us and a goal to move toward.

5. Thus a distinction is sometimes made between the moral "good" and the moral "right". Flawed, limited people can make the best decision they are capable of (so follow their well-formed conscience and thus is a moral good for them) but still make the wrong decision in the sense that it is objectively irresponsible or morally wrong (for example, relieving the suffering of a dying person by helping them obtain excessive medication that will cause their death).

*Reflection #5: Luke 10:29-37. Place self in scene; note that religious authority does not act in moral way; in fact, stranger, foreigner, despised heretic is the one who knows how to act when confronted with this unique situation. He has the better formed conscience.*

**C. The goal of a well-formed conscience is to develop the virtues/character of life so that we can trust the decisions we make. In that sense formation of conscience also involves our "hands and feet"; that is, it is never complete until we put our decisions into practice, learn from them, grow through them, deepen our wisdom because of the consequences we see lived out.**

1. Who we are as persons is expressed in concrete, loving, responsible actions. Every time we act we change our personal history and the history of others. If we act responsibly, responding to the "grace of God" for that moment in our lives, we open up the possibility that God can use that situation to transform us and others. If we act irresponsibly, then we close off one way God is trying to act in the world. Thus, our decisions/choices in life do need moral reflection. But most of what we do, we do spontaneously, without great thought, we just do (shop, drive, react, listen, etc.). A well-formed conscience is one that has consistently put into practice what is good and right and so shapes our actions into good patterns or habits. Such good patterns of practice we call virtues. Bad patterns we call vices. Together these form our "character". To the extent

that we are operating out of the virtues, we can trust in the goodness and rightness of our actions in most situations. To the extent we have developed patterns of bitterness, of defensiveness, of anger, of lack of trust, of feeling victimized, etc., our actions have a more difficult time being fully open to the good of the situation. In those cases we have to be more discerning and not go simply with our first instincts. The key virtues we try to put into practice are Christian love—what the New Testament calls *agape* (“ah-guh-pay”)—and Christian faith, and Christian hope.

FAITH  
HOPE  
LOVE

2. Many "well-intentioned and basically good" people can believe they are following their conscience yet repeatedly do things that hurt others or themselves—because they've not fully integrated the patterns of their lives into a whole, healed person at the core level. This is a life-long journey made more difficult because we don't have control over a good portion of it—our genetic and childhood heritage. But if the patterns of our lives are energized by and shaped by the wisdom of God, Church, and wise others—if we have integrated these into our character—then we don't need to worry as much each day about whether we are really forming and following our conscience. We are because we've formed good patterns and can trust them.

3. Thus, for the best formation of conscience we see the importance of trying to create good, loving environments when growing up; for good, accepting and loving environments when dealing with one's life as an adult (sometimes counseling, support groups, 12-step groups, etc.); especially consistently praying with a strong community of faith. We should not underestimate the influence of things like praying together before meals or at other times as a family; taking time to discuss events of the day or week and reflect on the moral quality of responses; modeling good listening, forgiving, and caring skills; building into our lives routines of Sunday worship, Christian service outreach, and contact with people we admire. A well-formed conscience is to be trusted and followed, but it takes intentional focus and ongoing formation to be well-formed.

*Reflection #6: Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-28, Matthew 5:43-48; John 13:34-35; Romans 12:9-21; 1 John 4:7-21. Love of God with whole heart, love of neighbor as self, love even your enemies; love as Jesus has first loved us. Think about a specific area you are struggling with and how God might be calling you to love in that situation..*

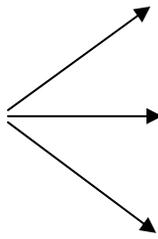
# FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

What is the goal of conscience formation?



**AN INTEGRATED LIFE OF MATURE VIRTUE, SO THAT ONE'S DEEPEST SENSE OF SELF IS ABLE TO JUDGE AND PUT INTO PRACTICE WHAT IS OBJECTIVELY GOOD AND RIGHT**

Where or to whom do we look to form our consciences?

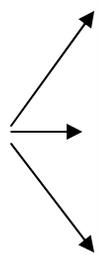


**WISDOM OF KEY OTHERS**  
(Persons we respect, Persons with expertise in given area)

**WISDOM OF CHURCH**  
(Teachings, practices, examples of saints)

**WISDOM OF GOD**  
(Revelation/God's Word)

In the process of forming our conscience we use:



**HEART:** prayer, openness to conversion, desire to be a disciple of Jesus, willingness to say "yes" to God's will for us, a deep "gut-level" sense of what is right/wrong

**HEAD:** Study, learn, ask questions, know facts, seek advice, pray, be willing to change one's minds, prudently deciding the best course of action

**HANDS:** consistently put the right choice into practice, taking responsibility for consequences, integrating our lives around patterns of virtue, pray, connect to communities/groups that support good moral values

## STEPS IN FORMING CONSCIENCE AS WE MAKE MORAL DECISIONS:

**Step 1: Use your current wisdom to LOOK at and assess the situation; try to view the situation and issues as clearly as possible.**

What is happening and what and who exactly is involved? What are some of the motives? What are possible consequences? What good can happen? What bad can occur?

**Step 2: PRAY that your heart is open to doing what is right.**

Am I willing to do what is right and do it for the right reasons? Am I open to the guidance of others? Am I willing to say “yes” to God?

**Step 3: Use your head to widen and test your understanding of what is good and right by SEEKING THE WISDOM of others.**

- **Wisdom of key others:** What do/would others say about this situation and why? Parents, family, respected friends, professionals who are experienced in dealing with this situation?
- **Wisdom of the Church:** Is there a teaching of the Church that applies to this situation? Whom could I ask? If I were to ask my faith community to pray with me, what would I ask them to pray for in this situation?
- **Wisdom of God:** How might the values of Jesus apply to this situation? Do the Scriptures have something to say to me? The commandments? The beatitudes? Stories from Jesus’ life?

**Step 4: Use your head and heart to make a personal DECISION.**

As I reflect on the wisdom of others and apply it to my situation, does my own understanding of what is at stake become clearer? Have I prayed about the situation and, if so, which direction gives me the greatest sense of peace? What is my conscience—the deepest core of who I am—telling me to do? Do I really desire to do the right thing and desire the best for myself and others?

**Step 5: Use your hands and feet and heart to ACT on the decision.**

What are the first steps I specifically need to take to put this decision into practice? Am I praying for continued wisdom and guidance from God? Am I praying for the courage to do what is right and for the right reasons? After taking these steps, has anything changed that would make me re-evaluate the decision? If so, start at Step 1 and move through the steps again.

**LOOK → PRAY → SEEK WISDOM → DECIDE → ACT**