

Encouragement Encouragement

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Conscience.. Guide or Unsafe

We often hear of someone saying – ‘my conscience is clear’- meaning that the person feels neither guilt nor remorse, this of course may be true and a vindication but is this a safe way to proceed..? We are now in the third week of Lent and it is a good time to ask ourselves that very question. Have I kept to my resolve in Lent, have I fasted, given alms, and more importantly changed my life in some way to allow for spiritual growth? Have I put all this to prayer? A good question maybe, but how good a guide is our conscience?

If you don’t care enough about these things, then you might be tempted to say ‘Yes’ without a moment’s hesitation. You might be in the fortunate position of having done all these things to the best of your ability, all that we are ever asked to do. But there is a deeper question...

Guilt and conscience do not always go together. We can feel guilty but indeed it maybe only regret or sadness but sometimes it may be only a scrupulosity which is in excess. A good example of this may be failure to go to Mass on Sunday when in fact you were too ill to go, or have family responsibilities for a sick family member etc., which prevented attendance. This relies on our perception of a God of punishment and not a God of Love who healed on the Sabbath. Another example would be to be guided by the attitudes of others and their sanctions whereas the acts or thoughts of the person were guided by different motives which were worthy of praise. Whereas guilt may be formed by conscience we have to be careful not to confuse the two.

So what of conscience - and why is it important? We are taught that it is essential to develop good conscience. What does that mean? Is it something we can learn or foster? Since we are all capable of wrongdoing we are instructed from childhood in the bosom of our families, in school, through catechesis, Sacramental preparation, and by society, at least broadly, to differentiate right from wrong.



The Catechism gives us a guide to this but crucially so does the Gospel, something that is often forgotten. A good question on this level is fact to ask ourselves ‘What would Jesus do?’ Or ‘what if Jesus saw me doing this and would I be able to look at Him or not or even be tempted to hide?’

But there are also other ways of developing a good conscience. We all have different ways of looking at things and different depths of understanding. A child is like a sponge that absorbs all it sees in those early years of life. It is often said that an abusive parent makes for an abusive child and later adult. This can be seen with issues such as ‘addictions’ of one kind or another. However, we must not jump to the conclusion that it is a certainty. Many people stand back by grace and reject what they saw and realise that that way of action or behaviour was wrong and do not imitate it. How do we proceed then to ensure that our conscience is properly formed and active?

It is very important to always look at three things when evaluating the degree and existence of wrong doing. To be culpable for anything three things have to be present now often forgotten in an age of doing things by *feelings* only. The Catechism outlines three important preconditions for any assessment of sinfulness, something that affects not only ourselves but others and is a *serious offence* the second is *in full knowledge*... a realisation that, that action is wrong and truly understand why and its consequence and finally *full consent*. Just a little word here too, for temptation of itself does not constitute a fault, if you resist, it may lead you to error, but of itself does not constitute it. Full consent is important as it has to be actively pursued and submitted to in full knowledge that it is wrong. Even civil law once based on Christian principles makes this distinction clear. An accidental act or mistaken act is considered very different to a deliberate one. These three preconditions are very important for they point us in the direction of understanding the things that

THE HOST APOSTOLATE
WWW.THEHOSTAPOSTOLATE.ORG

14, GOATBECK TERRACE,
LANGLEY MOOR,
COUNTY DURHAM DH7 8JJ
thehostapostolate@gmail.com

are deliberate acts against the Holiness of God and the respect and charity towards others. Can we develop our sensitivity to these things... of course we can and must. Each person has an innate God-given insight into what is essentially good or bad but by prayer and learning, even from our mistakes, this can be fully developed.

It is also important to learn from the lives of others and those who are there to inspire us with their lives of goodness, sometimes in very difficult situations where their choices are very challenging. Spiritual reading helps here, as does observing the lives of others. As we grow older, we can perhaps see more clearly what is not good for us in our relationship with people and society in general. There is a sense in which even the hardest of felons knows their own guilt (save for those who are deeply disturbed or ill) Prof. Tomas Matza* who studied the behaviour of repeat offenders, found that while living in a particular way or style, nevertheless, realised the basis for their actions was wrong regardless of their background. (*Delinquency and Drift)

Conscience is not only a matter of wrongdoing... The holier the Saint the greater becomes their desire to inform and shape their consciences. They grow in their imperative to do nothing that would do harm to others or crucially their relationship with God who is Love. Their love of God grows and grounds ever deeper as they realise that they are loved. Their soul becomes honed into the truth about themselves and their need of God who died for them. This can also be seen in those who serve others and have no belief in God but their basis for action is to do better for others and thus without realising it they act in a godly manner, a hidden gift to them.

Another way to look at conscience is the listening to that inner voice. If we have 'an informed conscience' which is crucial we can listen to what our hearts and heads are saying to us. Another way of looking at this is by looking at the *intentions* we have and the *consequences* of our attitudes and actions which can follow. We may think it is alright to do somethings but what will be the results for others and ourselves... A good question to ask in Lent and frequently!!



Our conscience has to be developed constantly and this can be achieved by prayer especially to the Holy Spirit. We are given gifts that will help us **discern**, an important word in this regard. It is important to be guided by insight – looking into our hearts at this time. Remember that Jesus ‘God made Man’ died so that we could be free - to love and to serve; the greatest desire of a Loving God is that we should be just that. Listening to God and our spiritual guides can help us and we can become people set apart, not faultless but aspiring to be Holy. Can we continue this Lent with this desire? Halina Holman

Catechism on Conscience (C.1798)

There are three general norms 1. You may never do evil so that good may result from it.

2. The golden rule “Whatever you wish that men would do for you, so do to them (Matthew 7:12)

3. Charity always proceeds by way of respect for one’s neighbour and his conscience even though this does not mean accepting as good something that is objectively evil.

Pope Francis: A time to renew Faith, Hope and Love.

Jesus revealed to his disciples the deepest meaning of His mission when He told them of His Passion, death and Resurrection, in fulfilment of the Father’s will. He then called the disciples to share in this mission for the salvation of the world. In our Lenten journey towards Easter, let us remember the One who “humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross”. During this season of conversion, let us renew our faith, draw from the “living water” of hope, and receive with open hearts the love of God, who makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. At the Easter vigil, we will renew our baptismal promises and experience rebirth as new men and women by the working of the Holy Spirit. This Lenten journey, like the entire pilgrimage of the Christian life, is even now illumined by the light of the Resurrection, which inspires the thoughts, attitudes and decisions of the followers of Christ. Ed. Rome 2021

Feast Days in March

1st St. David, Patron of Wales

4th St. Casimir (Kazimierz)

7th **Third Sunday of Lent**

8th St. John of God 9th St. Frances of Rome

14th **Fourth Sunday of Lent**

17th **St. Patrick, Apostle of Ireland**

18th St. Cyril of Jerusalem

19th **St. Joseph, Patron of the Holy Family & the Church**

20th St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne

21st **Fifth Sunday of Lent**

25th **The Annunciation of the Lord**

28th **Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday)**

Holy Week starts...