

Understanding Conscience

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Sister Agnes Walsh, a Daughter of Charity, is remembered for her heroism in France during World War II. In 1943, when France was occupied by German Nazis, the search for Jews began. In the face of grave peril, Sister Agnes convinced her mother superior to open their convent and offer refuge to a Jewish family. The sisters did the right, but very challenging, thing when many would have told them to take the easy way out.

Most of us won't face the extreme circumstances these women faced, but we all have our own challenges. What do I do if my boss gives me a task I believe is wrong? How do I make ethical decisions about medical treatment in times of serious illness?

In the life of following Jesus Christ, both great heroes and ordinary saints alike need the same thing: a well-formed conscience.

What is conscience?

God creates us with a capacity to know and love him, and we have a natural desire to seek the truth about him. Fortunately, we don't search for God unaided; indeed, he calls us to himself and writes his law on our hearts to help us draw closer to him.

Conscience helps us hear the voice of God; it helps us recognize the truth about God and the truth about how we ought to live. Conscience is "a judgment of reason"¹ by which we determine whether an action is right or wrong.

Jesus told the apostles, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We deepen our relationship with God by following him, and in doing so, we become more fully ourselves.

Importance of a Well-Formed Conscience

Have you ever made a decision that turned out badly, but if you had more information beforehand, you would have made a better decision? Sometimes, we may have the best of intentions to do good, but choose an action that is, in itself, wrong.

For example, think of learning a new language. We can only speak with the language we have, and if we have not received good education in vocabulary and grammar, we will communicate poorly, and others will not understand us. It is similar with conscience.

If our conscience isn't well-formed, we aren't well-equipped to determine right from wrong. All of us have the personal responsibility to align our consciences with the truth so that, when we are faced with the challenges of daily life, our consciences can help guide us well.

How to Form Our Consciences

Wherever we are on our journey with Christ, we can grow deeper with him by continuing the work of forming our consciences well, so that we may follow him ever more closely. Although not a complete list, these suggestions can help us as we seek to inform and strengthen our consciences with God's truth.

1. Pray

Through prayer and participation in the sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist, we encounter the living God. Spending time with the Lord, such as in silent adoration, opens our hearts to him. In drawing closer to the Lord, we allow God's grace to conform our minds and hearts to Christ, so that we might better discern in every moment how we ought to act.

2. Learn

Without a foundational, practical formation, it is difficult for our consciences to guide us well in concrete situations. As Catholics, we have the immense gift of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church and can turn to it for help forming our consciences. For example, learning about Christian moral principles, reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, or researching what the Church says about a challenging teaching will help us grow in knowledge of the truth. In turn, this helps us understand a little more how to live in a way that leads to our true happiness.

3. Reflect

We are formed by the stories we hear and tell. We may be uncertain how we ought to respond to various challenges as followers of Jesus, but there are many saints who have faced similar questions throughout the ages. Immersing ourselves in the stories of holy women and men can encourage us and help us develop habits of mind that allow us to grow. Stories help us hone our instincts.

4. Nurture friendships

A life of following Jesus is exceedingly difficult without help from a community. When we devote energy to holy friendships with people who are also trying to know, love, and serve the Lord, we gain partners who can lighten the load. Conversation with other Christians about how to respond to challenges in the life of discipleship are vital.

Two Challenges

A couple challenges we may face in following our consciences are worth noting.

1. Indifference

When we are bombarded with news, images, stories, and sound bites, it's easy to become numb to other people and the world around us. Conscience requires us to be attentive. We must listen to God, who speaks to us. Having a well-formed conscience doesn't mean we have all the answers to the complex problems in the world, but it does mean that we are sensitive to the needs and struggles of other people.

2. Coercion

Increasingly, we are seeing that certain groups use the power of the media and even of the state to coerce people to violate their consciences. We can see how unjust these types of actions are that insist that popular opinion, rather than conscience, should be our primary guide for action.

Our Response

Inspired by the example of Sister Agnes Walsh and her mother superior, let us devote ourselves anew to following wherever the Lord leads. Let us take courage from their example of faith and, when facing our own trials, remember what Jesus promised his apostles before ascending into heaven: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Be not afraid; God is with us.