

A Culture of Life, Part 5: Cautions and Caveats

Even in 5 parts — the most parts any topic has had, so far in these weekly essays — you cannot fully learn everything about Catholic moral theology, conscience formation, and moral decision making. But today's column will complete this effort to provide information for a good foundation in conscience formation.

All of this started out with the Culture of Life, remember? Choosing what is good is the way to build a Culture of Life Supporting the freedom of others to choose what is good, and learning to discern and follow God's will for ourselves is the way to build a Culture of Life, starting within the individual heart of the Catholic Christian and moving outward through family, community, and society.

But the thing is, as with every human effort, we can be wrong. The Catechism lists several ways this can happen, and they deserve a review here. Take a look, using the six factors for conscience formation as an outline:

Perhaps we are not familiar with the **Word of God**. It's not enough to find half of a verse just anywhere in the Bible and make a decision based on it. We have to have some level of understanding of what the Bible says, and what it means to us. Regular reflection on the Word is the way to achieve this.

Perhaps we do not know the **teaching of the Church**, or we do not know what is authoritative teaching and what is simply the opinion of a priest, deacon, bulletin writer, theologian, nun, or even a bishop. A certain maturity and familiarity with Church teachings in general is necessary.

Perhaps we are not willing to listen to **expert advice**, or perhaps the expert is wrong. We have to listen and evaluate critically — as adults do when making any important decision.

Perhaps we are not aware of new information (**signs of the times**) that has come to light, or perhaps we do not want to acknowledge its value. Perhaps, on the other hand, what seems to be new information is not really relevant to the issue we are considering.

Perhaps the **virtue of Prudence** escapes us, or we are distracted or otherwise unable to embrace this virtue fully.

Perhaps we have not fully opened ourselves to the **work of the Holy Spirit**; perhaps we need to pray more consistently so that the Holy Spirit is a familiar presence in our life.

Then there is the possibility of ignorance. If ignorance is unavoidable — we could not have known something critical — then we may make a wrong decision, yet not be culpable (blamed) for it. But if ignorance is persistent or willful — that is, we refuse to learn or know or acknowledge key information — then we are culpable for the wrong decision that is likely to result.

The formation of an adult's conscience is a lifelong process of prayer, reflection, and participation in the life of the Church. Most of us, most of the time, will arrive at a conscience decision that is fully aligned with what the Church teaches. And on those rare occasions when our carefully considered conclusion is different from the "letter of the law," we are likely to find ourselves at peace with our decision all the same.

Finally, it is possible that someone else's conscience decision will not be the same as ours would be in an apparently similar situation.

If you haven't already, please read the Catechism section on Conscience Formation, linked below. You can take my word for all of this, but you don't have to. Read it in the Church's own words! [Catechism of the Catholic Church - PART 3 SECTION 1 CHAPTER 1 ARTICLE 6 \(scborromeo.org\)](https://www.vatican.va/archive/other_catholic_documents/000361a.htm)