

Supplemental Information for
Why Catholic? Journey through the Catechism
Life In Christ – Walking With God
To group leaders of
Christ the King Parish, Springfield, Illinois

By Deacon Al Laabs
September/October, 2010

Session 3: “Conscience”

Suggested Environment

Note again that we are reverting to the table arrangement suggestion from year one but I would continue to make the *USCCA* a part of each table arrangement since many of you who used it think highly of it.

Lifting Our Hearts

Notice how we pray “Grant us the grace to know what is right...” So in a session that aims to explore how we begin to form that sense knowing right from wrong, we admit we need God’s help if we are to develop a certain moral guide that will steer our decisions and conform to the truth.

Sharing Our Good News

Both of the last two bullet points of Sharing Our Faith in our previous session might have an echo of this week’s exploration of conscience. Discussions from last week particularly of the third point, (an area I was grateful for Church guidance) should be recalled and I would suggest that you try to surface this during this segment. You might just say, “Remember when you said last week...that was a good point toward the idea of seeing our Church as a moral guide.” In addition, if someone took up the challenge of forgiving or making peace with a difficult person (see Living the Good News section), you might just comment on what a great step that must have been towards personal peace and certainly would have strengthened that “nagging voice of conscience which prompts us to towards reconciliation.”

Exploring the Catechism

There is an interesting assertion in the first paragraph that you might want to test. Do you think it is true that mentally and morally sound individuals have basically healthy and caring attitudes toward others? Is it true that our hearts are often spontaneously touched so that we help those in need? Concrete example: Christ the King parish gave over 15,000.00 dollars one

weekend to help those in Haiti when the earthquake struck. I don't want to overdo this issue but there is a long philosophical and literary discussion involving the nature of man that some members of your group may remember from college history or literature. The whole issue centers around our historical experience that we can be both saints and sinners, so to speak; that we can rise to great heights of civilized behavior and still experience such events as the Holocaust or the killing fields of Cambodia.

During the Enlightenment and an era of Romanticism, there was a discussion of an idea that man, if unaffected by civilization or religious influence, would be in a state of natural perfection in terms of moral qualities. Some writers used the term "noble savage" to describe this state of man and if you want to read more [about this follow this link](#). The reason I mention this is that the second paragraph points out that "education and formation of conscience is a lifelong task." What is important in conjunction with this statement is a conscious acknowledgement on our part of what we read in session one (see page 3, second paragraph from the bottom). "The human struggle to know what is right and to live a moral life is marred by our inclination to sin. This is the scar that our human nature bears from the wound of original sin CCC (1707)."

We tend to assume, often without reflection at times, that life makes sense because our faith perspective tells us that evil in the world or bad moral behavior is simply the result of original sin. My point is that we need to be conscious of our starting point since some scientists may look at what we see as behavior in light of the effects of original sin while they simply see the after effects of our primitive impulse to survive inherited through evolution. An awareness of who we are (creatures of a loving God) and what our destiny should be (to be reunited with the Trinity) is a beginning founded on faith. That critical sentence at the end of the top paragraph on page 15, "It is essential that we be **present to ourselves** [emphasis mine] in order to hear the voice of God and voice of our conscience" only makes sense when we are aware of our fundamental point of departure, our fundamental stance toward reality in a true sense through the eyes of faith.

So not only do we need to be present to ourselves but we need to find the quiet times and places to reflect and form our conscience and to pray. It certainly wouldn't hurt to raise the question with the group of how difficult it can be to find "quiet reflection time" in our busy lives. If there is one drawback to this always on and always in communication age, it is in the challenge we all have of being present to ourselves so we can feel the gentle nudges and hear the whispers of our God when we ask for guidance.

The second paragraph on page 15 has a very good working definition of conscience as the experience we have of ourselves choosing right from wrong and good from evil. It is important to point out section CCC 1782 since it has always been an important Church teaching that we must follow our conscience. Coupled with that however is the obligation we have to form our conscience in truth.

The final paragraph on page 15 has a great quote from the Vatican II document entitled "Dignitatis humanae." [Here is a link to the complete document](#). This document ties together the Church's teaching on the necessity of religious freedom but also outlines the key role the Church's history and Tradition play in shaping the truth of our existence. You might ask your group to highlight the words, "For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of

truth.” This is a very powerful statement and may prompt some discussion. At times when I have been involved in discussions around this topic, I have heard individuals lament the fact that the Church has lost so much credibility in their estimation due to the recent and ongoing scandals associated with bad priests. While we can’t deny the loss of credibility issue due to the behavior of some few, the historical and the real witness that the Church maintains to the world has to be a matter of pride for us believers and a recognition that the promised Spirit still lives in the world through the Church, witnessed through the magisterium and the people of God.

That final paragraph before the Scripture uses the word “responsibility” for our attitudes, words and actions. Another way of looking at that is to use the idea in the second session of saying we “own” our attitudes, words and actions and hence are liable for their effect not just on others but on ourselves as well. As owners of those three we want to know their degree of correctness or its opposite. So we turn, as is suggested to the light of the Gospel and the Church’s authoritative teaching of moral truth, recognizing that the Church is the bridge between Good News as handed down through the apostles and its application to the many diverse challenges faced by contemporary man.

Aside from the Church as a valuable resource in identifying the role of conscience in the world, I have always found it interesting to see what other parts of our human society have to say about some of these core issues that help us to understand our humanity. In 1948 the United Nations was formed and one of its early declarations was a document called the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. [Here is a link to the document](#)—it is quite short and worthwhile reading. You would be amazed at the many overlapping points in that declaration and the Church’s teaching on social issues. Notice that the very first article in that declaration, copied below in its entirety mentions the role of conscience.

Article 1.

- All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Scripture: Pondering the Word

Romans 2: 12-16

12

⁵All who sin outside the law will also perish without reference to it, and all who sin under the law will be judged in accordance with it.

13

For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who observe the law will be justified.

14

For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law.

15

They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts,⁶ while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them

16

on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus.

⁵ [12-16] Jews cannot reasonably demand from Gentiles the standard of conduct inculcated in the Old Testament since God did not address its revelation to them. Rather, God made it possible for Gentiles to know instinctively the difference between right and wrong. But, as Paul explained in [Romans 1:18-32](#), humanity misread the evidence of God's existence, power, and divinity, and "while claiming to be wise, they became fools" ([Romans 1:22](#)).

I have included the above footnote that introduces this section of Romans since Paul at times can be difficult to follow. You have to remember that he is writing to an audience that would have a much different cultural and historical background than we do. Notice that the commentary seems to almost use the word "instinctively" as a synonym for the word "naturally." Hence, a sort of recognition that our creator has written laws in our hearts which are natural to us in a sense.

Sharing Questions

You have to be a little bit careful with this question because there can be a slight misunderstanding between what St. Paul is getting at and the sense of this question. Paul is making an argument that Gentiles who are not or have not been exposed to the Mosaic Law have in some sense an awareness of many of the prescriptions of that law, hence he would argue that there is a certain natural law written in their hearts. This question is pushing us to think beyond the merely natural so much so that in transforming ourselves to follow God's law, we could be said to have come so close to it that is "natural" to us in the sense that it has become written on our hearts—it has become part of our very being. That is after all what we pray for and desire as a result of God's transforming grace in our lives.

Exploring the Catechism (continued)

Our action as moral beings as well as our awareness of ourselves as moral beings makes possible personal relationships. Imagine all the negative qualities of personal relationships mentioned in that first paragraph and try to imagine how two people would relate if they were hateful, deceitful, disloyal, etc. You might even ask your group if they can see how difficult it

would be to find any possible basis of friendship when we treat others merely as objects to be manipulated.

The second paragraph is very straight forward and I would encourage you to break out the four key components necessary for the formation of a good conscience. Note also the role that God's transforming grace must play if we are to be successful.

I think it would be worthwhile to surface the idea of what I would call "cultural tension." We do experience this all the time while most often not naming it. For example, we want to respect the rights of others and practice tolerance and respect the conscience of others. But to what extent do we then tolerate behavior when it harms others, as in the case of abortion? Or, as the text points out, tolerate systematic injustices to entire groups of individuals such as was the practice when racial segregation laws existed in the South? There are many such issues present in our society today such as movements that would attack the very idea of what marriage has meant both religiously and historically. I think the direction that would be most helpful is to see how important is not only the role but the need for a voice such as the Church to aid us in finding the key to moral living. Second, I think it is important to acknowledge that living with these types of tensions is a part of our journey as pilgrim people of God. And a third point not to be overlooked is our duty to witness to the truth of moral living and be agents of change in society. Much, much more will be said about this point in an upcoming session. Perhaps with the idea of challenges and tensions always with us as we move forward in time, we can understand more completely our Lord's wisdom when he promised that the Spirit would always be with us and live in his Church.

Sharing Our Faith

These are some great questions to discuss again. I would highly recommend pointing towards the second bullet point. I think everyone has been in that situation and groups may benefit particularly if someone has found a key way of balancing that loving and caring aspect while still being honest with the issue at hand. You might also point out how easily we give in to the temptation to avoid conflict and confrontation for the sake of "peace."

Living the Good News

Bullet points one and three are both direct challenges to each of us individually; particularly as they would demand of our conscience some sort of changed behavior if we truly did recognize we are on a path or direction that is unacceptable. There is a good opportunity to let our conscience respond to the needs of our local food banks as mentioned in point two. It would certainly be a nice group effort if every member were to consider bringing some donation the following weekend. CTK has a frequent pickup by the St. Martin de Porres Food Pantry and it is so easy to drop off a contribution in the usher's room to the right of the main entrance.

Lifting our Hearts

You will find me encouraging each group to open up the closing to spontaneous prayer for all the variety of intentions that we always do carry in our hearts so suggest going around the room/group to ask each person present to pray for a specific intention. Since the month of October is Respect Life Month, please include a petition for the recognition of the value and sanctity of life among your prayers.

Additional note: Suggest to those who have the *USCCB* (red book) that pages 315 to 318 would be a great read for the next session on Virtues.

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to allaabs1770@gmail.com