

The Institute for Catechesis and Formation **ICF 105 – Christian Morality**

Welcome all back...field any questions or concerns.

This course provides a basic introduction to the fundamental teachings of Catholic morality and its foundations in Sacred Scripture, Tradition and Natural Law. Participants will examine virtue, conscience formation and apply moral theology to contemporary moral issues in the areas of health care and human sexuality

Texts: Introduction to Catholicism for Adults, Rev. James Socias (ICA)
Supplemental Reading:

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC): <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc.htm>

The Bible: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/>

Week 2: Conscience, Action and God's Grace

ICA Chapters 18; CCC Part III, Sec. 2, Part III, Sec. 1

I think tonight's topic, conscience, is sometimes a poorly understood idea. We usually admit quite readily that we have one, that it is good to stay within it and to go against it is a weakness and often a tragedy. Where the issue arises, is what constitutes a 'well-formed' conscience. So that will be one of our goals this evening.

We determine ourselves through our **freely chosen acts**. Our acts give definition to who we are as moral beings, and in relation to God and others. We choose actions, but we do not determine if these acts are good or bad (cf. Gn. 2:16-17; Rev. 2:7)

We must make **decisions** in accord with **Truth**. (**John 8: 31-32** - If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.)

The Biblical passage from John 8 places a condition on being a disciple. It stipulates we will remain his disciples 'if we remain in his word'. And it follows

with that famous, oft quoted line, 'the truth will set us free'. We should recall that freedom and law are not opposed. This freedom is 'the ability to do that which we were designed to do'. The law is simply the "owner's manual" and the truth is "cars run on gasoline not milk".

What is Conscience?

Conscience (CCC1778)

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.

We spoke last week of conscience and the cardinal virtue of prudence. If you recall, the potential parts are Deliberation (counsel), Judgment and Command. This in fact is how one forms his or her conscience.

Here then with conscience we are dealing with something that is deeply rooted in the dignity of the human person.

Gaudium spes §16 - "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."

Dignitatis Humanae §3.4 - On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious. On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come

to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious.

Pope Francis (June 30, 2013 Angelus Message) - "So we also must learn to listen more to our conscience. Be careful, however: this does not mean we ought to follow our ego, do whatever interests us, whatever suits us, whatever pleases us. That is not conscience. Conscience is the interior space in which we can listen to and hear the truth, the good, the voice of God. It is the inner place of our relationship with Him, who speaks to our heart and helps us to discern, to understand the path we ought to take, and once the decision is made, to move forward, to remain faithful."

- **Right conscience** – makes a correct judgment based on the moral law.

Before we look at some of the circumstances of an erroneous conscience, let's assert that a properly formed conscience is in line with the moral law as it has been revealed by Christ to His Church. Now, to people young and old, Catholic and those of other faith expressions, that sounds like a conscience is simply doing what the Church teaches. You could imagine the cynicism this generates. It can appear that the Church is simply laying out the path, and everyone needs to fall in line. Without making this the issue, the Catholic Church does not claim to have the only claims to truth, but it does assert to possessing the fullness of truth. When God spoke to Saul (St. Paul), He didn't say why are persecuting my Church, He asked why Saul was persecuting Him. Now the Catholic Church has not 'declared' the 'law' on every last detail of Christian living and morality. Often, as we will see next week when we delve into bioethics, some of this has to be figured out; the theological ideas is it must be 'approved by custom'. So what happens when there is genuine doubt?

I would like to share an insight from St. Aphonusus Liguori which is rarely addressed in catechesis. The terms is a ten dollar word, equiprobabilism. It was the result of reconciling the rigorists and the laxists in terms of moral action when there is doubt in terms of civil and moral law. *In nuce*, if there is a doubt of fact, then the law should be favored (followed), but if there is a doubt of law,

then liberty should be favored (allowed). In short, we can't ask more of the conscience than reason can detect and law can guide.

- **Erroneous conscience** – Makes an incorrect judgment. A person judges an evil act to be good.

Cardinal Ratzinger on an erroneous conscience (1991 Lecture at a conference for Bishops in Dallas, TX) - "It will not do to identify man's conscience with the self-consciousness of the I, with its subjective certainty about itself and its moral behavior. On the one hand, this consciousness may be a mere reflection of the social surroundings of the opinions in vogue." We often don't realize how well our thinking conforms to our own time and era. We've learned much, not just from science and technology, but from that many things that have been 'approved by custom', i.e., we've learned and reevaluated.

Sometimes man is personally responsible for the ill-formed conscience (vincible ignorance). CCC §1791-"This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man "takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin." In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits." Thomas Aquinas identified three obstacles to proper moral reflection; dullness of mind (unable to know properly), anxieties of life (lacking moral diligence), apathy (I don't care to know). None of those remove the culpability or imputation of the guilt.

I think on some level, this is where we can address the preponderance of technology and social media. Those of us that teach know the benefit of technology, but we also need to be aware of the wider effects that are part of atmosphere they introduce. Without making this an issue, technology has always changed the way we learned. They say that once books were easy to mass-produce (thanks Gutenberg), it changed not only the way people learned, but over time it effected our brain synapses. Whether that led to more distraction we will leave for others to deduce, or a groan session after class...ha!

Sometimes man is not totally responsible for the ill-formed conscience (invincible ignorance). CCC §1793-"If - on the contrary - the ignorance is invincible, or the

moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience.”

Last week, I introduced how an ethical action is determined good or licit. Recall that the object, the intention and the circumstance must all be good. And that the primary determiner is the object rationally chosen. But there are other ways that have and are used to determine a moral action, and they lead to error and confusion. I am presenting these with clear distinctions, but in reality they all have variations and expressions that fall along a gradient. In short, there are varying expressions present in each ethical system.

The first is consequentialism (Jeremy Bentham), or the end justifies the means. In other words this emphasizes the intention and determines the ethical licitness (or whether it is good) by the outcome. There is a hierarchy of values that determine the happiness of an individual, and that goal as a consequence takes precedence over the means to achieve that end. We oppose this in that we can never do evil that good may come of it. So to use flattery as an example to further one’s career (and may I add here that in Dante, the flatterers are in the eighth level of hell, six circles down from the fornicators), to attempt to influence an employer, etc. in an attempt to curry favor is an evil. There is nothing wrong or illicit with wanting to advance or to gain greater authority in one’s profession, but another person is never to be used as a means to an end. In this scenario, the flatterer recognizes the consequence (better position) as worth the constant praise and brown nosing.

The other approach is proportionalism (Catholic theologians Joseph Fuchs and Richard A. McCormick). Here one is trying to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number by weighing the good and bad and choosing the action that offers more good. This is nuanced from consequentialism in that it weighs the benefits and the harms, as opposed strictly to the consequence. If there seems to be great risks involved with a potential pregnancy, a proportional evaluation would weigh contracepting in the first place against the mother’s health and life, the value of the mother to other children, her husband, etc. They may conclude that using contraception is a family stabilizing act. So they increase object as the totality of the act by including the hoped for outcome. Many might be sympathetic to such an evaluation, but it doesn’t consider the inherent evil of the

act rationally chosen. They consider contraception pre-moral, in that requires other circumstances to determine its morality, as opposed to murder which need not any other qualification.

Another is situation ethics. Here the circumstances and intention are taken as a priority, as opposed to any absolute standard or value. This system (Joseph Fletcher) looks for the greatest loving outcome (in the end, the consequence of love is all that matters). Maybe an example could be that of sacrificial fornication. A woman, un-married with three young children ‘pays the bills’ through prostitution. She clearly wouldn’t do that if she didn’t need to care for her children, or were married. She loves her children dearly, and shields them from her ‘livelihood’ but makes no apologies in sacrificing for her children.

One last one to look at is deontology (Immanuel Kant). This is duty-based ethics. Here there are intrinsic goods, absolutes. A theistic approach would place those absolutes with God (Divine Command Theory), but others would simply follow the maxim “you cannot will a law that is not universally applicable”. The weakness here is that it doesn’t properly consider intention and certainly not circumstances. Also, what does one do when there are apparent conflicting duties? During WWII, if I were hiding a Jewish person, do I lie to preserve life (duty to humanity and God) or reveal the location of the hiding Jewish person (duty to truth and perhaps country)?

Anyway, we could go on here, but that’s enough. Lastly, let it be said that John Paul II has come down very forcefully on both consequentialism and proportionalism as not just philosophically flawed, but contrary to Divine Revelation.

But what if we aren’t certain about the law, or if our conscience is not giving us a clear way to assess the situation?

- **Doubtful conscience** – One is not sure of the morality of a choice. The person has an obligation to search out the truth before making a choice.

Here we have to ask if we’re really concerned about the truth, or if we use our ignorance as a means to defend our disordered desires and passions. Perhaps we like to live in our ignorance. We’ve all heard the idiom, “Ignorance is bliss.” That

says more about our time and us as a people than the truth of that statement. The full quote from Thomas Grey is “Where ignorance is bliss, tis folly to be wise.”

In short, if you don’t know what the prudent thing to do is, then ask a prudent person.

- Conscience is to be oriented toward Truth and what is Good.

What is true and good is the end or goal of God meeting us in the conscience, in the depths of our being. The conscience is not something outside of man. This is God’s means to draw us to Himself. God is true and good, and as man is oriented to and towards Him, so too it stands to reason that our conscience is to be oriented toward Truth and what is Good.

- Conscience helps us to judge our actions rightly, not to decide for ourselves if an act is morally good or bad.

We must be careful not to cross the boundary our first parents crossed. We are not to determine what is good and evil, our conscience is only to recognize what is objectively good and evil.

- Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-à-vis the objective norm which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behaviour. (*Dominum et vivificantem* 43)

I think all of us can identify with Paul’s situation as he stated in the Epistle to the Romans.

Our **appetites** can steer us from good choices (**Rom 7: 18-23** – For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. Now if (I) do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.)

It is by God's grace and our free response to His self-offering, and by following Him that we can begin to overcome sin and learn to make choices that lead to our fulfillment. (Cf. 1 Cor 2:12; Rom 3:23-24; Ps 23:3, 25:4;)

Let's wrap up before break by recognizing this is difficult. Christ understands that...it's only in and with His grace that any of this is possible, and more importantly achievable. Pope Francis said we should have patience with ourselves. I know he's correct. So let's go to break asking God for the fortitude to be patient.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are some concrete, and practical ways that we can form our conscience? In the end, how will we be certain we're not in error?
2. How do the 'alternative' ethical systems (those resulting in an erroneous conscience) lead to moral relativism?
3. What is the relation between conscience formation and our participation in the civic and political life?

Along with His grace, God offers us His help to avoid sin and live a good life through the Decalogue (10 Commandments). Jesus further reveals the Way to fulfillment in the Beatitudes, the Great Command (Mt 22:36-40), and by the witness of His very life, death and resurrection.

Let us first state once more that the Ten Commandments are not laws imposed from the outside of the human person, but can be known by natural law. Also that they are not opposed to freedom, but point directly to the basis of our freedom.

The Decalogue, the Beatitudes, the cultivating virtue, and the teachings of the Church together reveal how Christ wants us to live and set us on the path to eternal happiness

- **The Ten Commandments** – Christ elevated the Old Law in the New Law. He came not to abolish the Old Law but to fulfill it; His New Covenant not only includes the Mosaic Law but also transcends and perfects the Old Covenant. The Ten Commandments do not represent a minimum standard rather they are a divine call to Christian perfection and love of God and neighbor. The Commandments show us how to be in right relationship with God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

With the Ten Commandments, one can immediately think of the Rich Young Ruler. He kept the commandments from the time of his youth. Can anyone here say that? I don't think I would like to have that time-line go back too far for myself. But anyway, even after Christ said that young man was not too far from perfection, he still needed to do one thing. He needed to sell all he had and follow Christ. With that young man, many of us walk away sad.

That story tells us that the Ten Commandments are essential for a Christian life, but not sufficient in themselves to be with God eternally. They must be kept faithfully and fully. But, and this is important, they are also not the minimum standard. It's not enough that we 'shall not kill', that we 'shall not commit adultery', etc.

Christ elevated the Decalogue. We know that 'shall not kill' is to include hating. We know that 'shall not commit adultery' is to include lust. This too is not new. Since Christ came to abolish none of the law, it was always intended to be understood at this level. Christ Himself came to reveal that much. The point is the the Ten Commandments is and was not intended to simply regulate behavior, but to transform the human person.

We need the salvation only Jesus can give to us and His continued guidance and love. Therefore He leaves us the Sacraments, as well as precepts, to help us live as Christian witnesses. We need the continued help of God's grace to overcome our sinfulness and properly exercise our freedom. (What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. Romans 7:15)

- **The Beatitudes** – Perfection of Moral Law (Matthew 5: 3-12)
Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, and He represents the continuation of God's loving and patient teaching. Jesus calls us to a mature faith: When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. (1 Cor 13:11)

What needs to be kept in mind is that these represent Christ's perfection of the Law. The distinction with these beatitudes, in contrast to any of the promises of the prophets or wisdom literature, is that the fulfillment of the beatitudes is eschatological (end times) and meant for after this life on earth.

That should give us a different understanding of happiness in this life. We like to think that Christ's suffering replaces our own, i.e., He suffered so we don't have to. But the truth is that the Christian life is often filled with sorrow, while we live in hope. It's my personal opinion that the Christian life is quite the paradox.

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The root of the word 'poor' means *bent down, miserable, poor*. This cannot be reduced down to the normal meaning of poor (although we would have to define that), but it also cannot be disconnected from the meaning of financial poverty. In Luke's parallel verses, the antithesis specifically states 'woe to you who are rich'.

2. Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land.

Here we are to bend ourselves down to God and man. This is in the hope of inheriting the Promised Land of Israel - our symbolic heavenly home. Psalm 37:11. There's a hint of obedience attached to meekness. We have to look at success in a much different way. This in turn effects every aspect of our living. To some, we will look like failures, lacking incentive and not being competitive (though I fail to find competitiveness as a virtue anywhere in Scripture. This attitude of meekness entails suffering injustices and disappointments.

3. Blessed are they who mourn: for they shall be comforted.

This mourning is not a wailing from mourning, but the opposite of frivolous and worldly joy. This may be understood as the suffering of a pious man in the world. The comfort can point to an endurance.

4. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they shall have their fill.

Here we are speaking of moral progress, holiness and perfection. But it certainly can be justice in the world, which is not the bleeding heart, as it is often portrayed. It takes a keen intellect and acumen to recognize injustices where many others miss it entirely.

5. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Christ's death and resurrection is the means of forgiveness for all men. We have all been forgiven of much, and in turn are expected to 'pay that forward'. This may be one of those times when we set the standard for our own mercy.

6. Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God.

Love, chastity, love of truth and an orthodox faith. This is seeing others as God sees them. I think the pure heart has the eyes of Christ.

7. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

This is the individual who not only lives in peace, but does his best to preserve peace in his own life, family, community, etc. Here too, a peacemaker is a witness to truth. The peacemakers lower blood pressure when they enter the room (share story of Mr. Rogers as part of the hotel room prank...they couldn't unnerve him).

8. Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This beatitude follows the common approach of Biblical poetry and returns to the first in terms of reward. If we follow Christ, and He suffered and died, we should anticipate no better. Bishop Fulton Sheen coined the term 'dry martyr' to refer to those who live as Christ did without suffering physical martyrdom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What would a list of Modern Culture's Ten Commandments look like? Let's construct a list pertaining to each commandment.

1. I am the LORD your God. You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

2. What is the most challenging aspect of the Beatitudes (we could discuss a particular beatitude)? Personally? As a culture?

The students, with the teacher than should participate in a class-wide discussion.