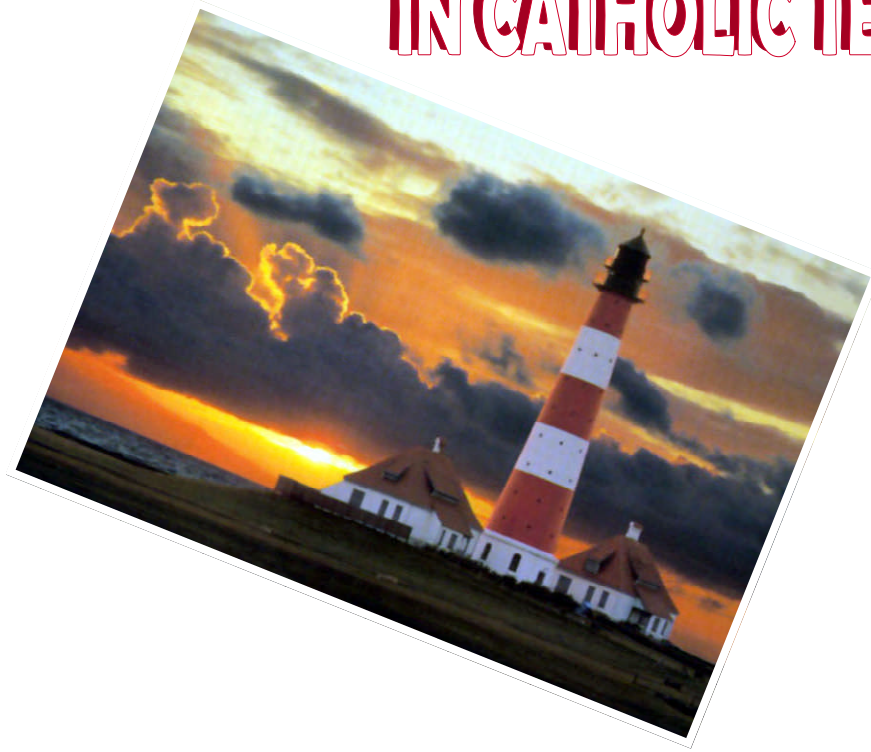


UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES

CONSCIENCE IN CATHOLIC TEACHING



*Written by John Thornhill SM
Designed and produced by Patrick Lim*

THE EMMAUS SERIES



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

CONSCIENCE IN CATHOLIC TEACHING

SESSION 1

Introductory reading

The Primacy of Conscience (2006)

From an article by Brian Lewis, an Australian Theologian

The principle of the primacy of conscience is deeply embedded in our western moral tradition. According to this principle, one must follow the sure judgment of conscience even when through no fault of one's own it is mistaken. St. Paul had occasion to address this issue in regard to what Christians should do about food that had been sacrificed to idols and was therefore thought taboo (1 Cor 8 and Rom 14): 'Consider the man fortunate who can make his decision without going against his conscience. But anybody who eats in a state of doubt is condemned, because he is not in good faith' (Rom 22-23). The morality of what one does is thus for Paul essentially dependent on one's clear conviction of being right or 'in the truth'. In this he affirms the primacy of the person (and of conscience), even when he or she is objectively mistaken in good faith. The primacy of conscience is encapsulated in the traditional expression: Conscience is the immediate or proximate norm of morality. ◇

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ What is the understanding of conscience you derived from your Catholic formation?
- ◆ Do you think that there are aspects of the question that needed to be further clarified?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Introduction
- ◆ Chapter 1:
What is Conscience

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

Letter Paul to the Philippians (4:4-9)

Always be joyful, then, in the Lord; I repeat, be joyful. Let your good sense be obvious to everybody. The Lord is near. Never worry about anything; but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus. Finally, let your minds be filled with everything that is true, everything that is honourable, everything that is upright and pure, everything that we love and admire – with whatever is good and praiseworthy ... Then the God of peace will be with you. ◇

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ Has what has been presented led you to a new understanding of aspects of the conscience process that you can share with the group?
- ◆ Are there questions for which you will be looking for answers in the next session?

CONSCIENCE IN CATHOLIC TEACHING

SESSION 2

Introductory reading

The Primacy of Conscience (2006)

An abridged excerpt of the article of Brian Lewis

The primacy of conscience does not mean that the subject is made the standard over against the claims of truth. Rather 'conscience signifies the demanding presence of the voice of truth in the subject themselves' (the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, speaking in 1991). The primacy of conscience is thus necessarily linked to the prior centrality of truth in the depths of the person and can be understood only from this vantage point. (As one theologian puts it): 'Conscience is where we meet God's Spirit leading us'.

Ultimately the assistance that comes from without is to serve the original memory of the truth the Creator has planted in the depths of our being, which awaits and fully blossoms in the larger Christian memory centred on the truth in person, Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life. □

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ Has an appreciation of the workings of conscience in people's lives given you a more optimistic view of the human family?
- ◆ Do you see the importance of a balanced understanding of conscience, if we are to have a realistic attitude towards young people growing up in our rapidly changing world?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 2:
Practical Implications
- ◆ Chapter 3:
Factors that Disrupt the Conscience Process
- ◆ Chapter 4:
Relating to the Church's Pastoral Guidance

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

Psalm 23

This Psalm is to be recited by one person or by the group as a whole.

The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures
where he gives me repose.
Near restful waters he leads me,
to revive my drooping spirit.

He guides me along the right path;
he is true to his name.
If I should walk in the valley of darkness
no evil would I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort.

You have prepared a banquet for me
in the sight of my foes.
My head you have anointed with oil;
my cup is overflowing.

Surely goodness and kindness
shall follow me all the days of my life.
In the Lord's own house
shall I dwell for ever and ever.◇

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

1. *An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*

2. *The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ Do you think that an inadequate understanding of conscience has caused unnecessary suffering to a number of sincere Catholics, as they sought to relate to Church teaching?

- ◆ How would you reply to someone who said 'acting according to one's conscience' seems to imply you can make up your own rules?

- ◆ What is the principal thing you take away from our two sessions on conscience?

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

The sense of 'right and wrong', and the responsibility this implies, is a basic human experience. Many cultures liken conscience to a 'divine voice in the heart'. People sum up the essentials of conscience when they acknowledge that a person is responsible for their actions, 'according to their lights'. This presentation explains the teaching of **two great Catholic authorities** (Thomas Aquinas and Cardinal Newman). For them, conscience does not provide a complete blueprint of right and wrong; it provides acts of judgment, arrived at by a **very complex process**.

This process involves: 1) self-evident principles, that are very general and few in number; 2) the application of these principles to the complexity of life situations; and 3) a judgment concerning the action that is contemplated. The **self-evident principles** give rise in all human cultures to codes and sanctions (e.g. concerning homicide, justice and human sexuality). The **application of these principles** ('moral science') depends upon the resources available to the person at the time. Though many think of conscience as an evaluation made after an action, the **essential judgment of conscience** takes place before the action. Conscience concerns, not only 'right and wrong', but also the **gravity or seriousness** of the action.

Conscience should **not be confused with feelings** or emotions. These normally support the judgment; but can be seriously misleading. If conscience is recognised as **upholding positive values**, rather than avoiding guilt, it can be an important factor in personal development. Good conscience does not displace **God's law**, but is essentially a **mediator**, giving access to God's law. It is with reference to this function that Newman speaks of 'the supreme authority of conscience'; and Vatican II teaches that in the final judgment of conscience the person is 'alone with God'. Given the complexity of the process of conscience, it follows that the judgment of conscience '**frequently errs, without losing its dignity**' (Vatican II). A person **acts in good conscience** when they make their conscience decision responsibly, in prayerful humility before God. We are not only responsible *before* our conscience, but also responsible *for* our conscience.

Emotional disturbance can **disrupt the conscience process** in varying degrees (psychotic breakdown, severe anxiety states, 'scruples', for instance). The **bias** involved in decisions that touch us personally, while it cannot be avoided, must be honestly acknowledged in a healthy judgment of conscience. Today's **cultural upheaval** - because it deprives young people of the authority with which traditions were handed on in the past - profoundly affects their conscience process. In today's situation the witness and hope of Christians is important.

We can be grateful that **Church teaching** today takes conscience seriously – upholding the principles we have been explaining. (See especially the **Pastoral Letter of Aust. Bishops 1974**). Today – as they interpret the responsibilities of life in a very complex world - both pastors and faithful need to be open to the Spirit of Christ, the great moral educator. ◇

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