

## LESSON 3

# CONSCIENCE: GOD'S LAW IN OUR HEARTS

### BACKGROUND READING



In our lives we make choices that either lead us on the path toward Heaven or the path of slavery and death in sin. To choose implies freedom of the will. In order for our choices between good and evil to mean something—for them to be moral choices—we must be free in our choice. Free will is a gift from God Himself and is a faculty or ability of the soul. It is one of the ways in which we are made in the image and likeness of God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines freedom as “the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility” (CCC 1731). God respects our dignity by allowing us to be in control of our actions and responsible for our choices.

#### **The Freedom to Choose**

Today’s culture defines freedom as being able to do whatever we feel like doing whenever we want. We often hear people defending their actions (even though they frequently are immoral) by declaring that they are “free” to do as they wish. As parents we all have experienced, at one time or another, our children saying (or at least implying) “you can’t make me do that!” But this attitude toward freedom is actually an

abuse of the God-given gift of our free will. The *Catechism* tells us that “freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude” (CCC 1731).

Since God created us, He knows what is good for us. We find our ultimate happiness growing in holiness to become closer to Him. We find true freedom growing in truth and goodness because that ultimately fulfills our human nature, making us freer to be who we are meant to be. Choosing sin leads us into slavery, the slavery of losing control to our passions, addictions, and selfishness. We become less than what we were created to be. The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. To first start this process of choosing what is good requires faith. But then we find that true freedom is not to do whatever we desire, but rather it is freedom for growth in holiness and goodness in relationship with our God.

#### **Conscience: God’s Voice Within**

God knows that choosing the good is not always easy for us. He knows that we are attracted to sin and that the right choices are not always clear. So, to help us, God wrote His law within the heart of every single human person. This

gift of His law is called a conscience. Our conscience guides us in making judgments or choices that lead us to the good. When we choose the good our conscience confirms that we are acting according to God's will. When we choose evil, then our conscience tells us that we were wrong.

Our conscience, however, doesn't work like magic. It doesn't tell us the difference between right or wrong with no effort on our part. In fact, it is possible to leave our conscience undeveloped, like it is sleeping, and it is even possible to form a bad conscience. That is why it is our moral obligation to form our consciences according to the truth.

Making good moral choices takes lots of training and study. After all, just because a baby comes into this world with legs, doesn't mean that she can walk. A baby needs to first learn to stand, then to walk, then to run. So it is with our conscience. We must spend time, study, and pray continuously in order to rightly form our conscience. Indeed, the formation of our conscience is a lifelong job.

## The Moral Formation of Conscience

What are the helps that God has given us in order that we might rightly form our conscience? They are the "signs along the way" that we are studying this year. In the Psalms we pray, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). In the Word of God we find the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, as well as the teachings of the Apostles. We must accept God's Word in faith, and then respond with a life of prayer – talking with and listening to God.

Good habits or rules for developing a moral conscience are:

- ▶ Examining our conscience daily (reflecting on the good and bad actions

we have committed throughout the day).

- ▶ Praying for and developing the Gifts of the Holy Spirit we received in Baptism and Confirmation.
- ▶ Seeking the advice of holy, virtuous people we respect.
- ▶ Always allowing our understanding to be guided by the teaching authority of the Church.

After we have learned God's ways, then we must put into practice what we have learned. This process is how virtue is formed in our lives, and these virtues enable us to make better and better choices.

Other rules that help us to discern if an action is moral or immoral are:

- ▶ You may never do evil so that good may come about (the end does not justify the means).
- ▶ You should always follow the Golden Rule (do unto others what you would have them do unto you).
- ▶ You must always be guided by charity and respect for your neighbor and his conscience (cf. CCC 1789).

Whenever we are certain that what our conscience is telling us is the right and just thing to do, we must act according to its dictates. Human persons must always be free to choose in accordance with their conscience. To force a person to act contrary to his or her conscience violates the dignity that belongs to everyone made in the image and likeness of God.

We must not squander the gifts God has given us. Our grateful response to the law He has written in our hearts is to live lives that listen for His voice. We can give God back the gift of our complete trust in His Word because we know that Christ will always call us to Life in Himself.

## LESSON 4

# WE MUST AVOID SIN AND GROW IN HOLINESS

### BACKGROUND READING



Even with all the signs along the way that help us choose the path of life, we can still take a wrong turn. Because of our attachment to sin due to our wounded natures (the consequence of Original Sin) we live in a constant struggle between life and death. Sanctifying grace is literally God's very life in our soul. Sin destroys that life and leads to the death of the soul. But God in His mercy gives us countless opportunities to turn back onto the path of life if we have a contrite heart.

Mercy in its fullness was shown to us in the sacrificial Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus came into the world to forgive sinners. The angel Gabriel affirmed this when He said to Joseph: "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). In order to receive God's mercy, we must know that we are sinners and in need of His loving forgiveness. Thus, any study of the moral life must include a study of sin.

#### What Is Sin?

The *Catechism* defines sin as "an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law." Sin always sets our wills against the eternal

love of God. It is a rejection of God and His love, and a choice for love of self. The traditional teaching of the Church distinguishes between two types of sins: mortal sin and venial sin.

When we sin mortally we lose the supernatural life that is necessary for us to live in Heaven. That is why we call mortal sins "mortal." Like how a mortal wound leads to the death of the body, a mortal sin leads to the death of the soul. When we sin mortally, we must seek conversion of heart through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. A good confession not only brings about forgiveness of our sin, but it also restores the life of sanctifying grace, the gift of divine life, to our souls.

In order for a sin to be mortal, the following three conditions must be met:

- ▶ The sin must be of grave or serious matter. Grave matter is those sins that are specified by the Ten Commandments, and some sins are graver than others.
- ▶ The sin must be committed with full knowledge. This means that the person sinning must know that what he or she is doing is wrong and violates God's law.

- › The sin must be committed with complete consent. This means that the sin must be a deliberate and personal choice. Passions, external pressures, and pathological disorders can lessen the voluntary nature of the act and therefore lessen or even eliminate the moral responsibility for the sin.

Venial sin is all sin in which one or more of the conditions for mortal sin are not met. But even though venial sin does not destroy God's life within us, that does not mean that venial sins should be easily brushed off. Venial sins weaken our charity and get in the way of our doing good and forming moral habits; therefore, they make it easier for us to commit mortal sin.

It is important for us to know that we cannot sin by accident or by mistake, and that temptation itself is not sin. Even Jesus was tempted to do wrong, but He never sinned. When temptation enters our minds, we must turn to God in prayer and ask Him for the grace to do the right thing.

## The Precepts of the Church

God's mercy is unlimited, and we can throw ourselves on His mercy in the pursuit of the moral life. No matter how much we stumble and trip up, our sins can be forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and we can start afresh in God's grace. In our

journey toward holiness, the Church gives us five precepts or laws that act as starting points to show us the very minimum required to develop our spiritual lives and grow in love of God and of neighbor.

The five precepts of the Church are:

- › We must attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation.
- › We must confess our sins to a priest at least once a year.
- › We must receive Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist at least once a year during the Easter season.
- › We must observe the days of abstinence and fasting. (The Church calls us to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, all Fridays during Lent, and Good Friday, and to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.)
- › We must contribute to the support of the Church.

The Five Precepts of the Church are a basic framework of what is required for Life in Christ. If we follow these five precepts, then we participate in the life of the Church that will help us on our journey toward holiness. These precepts are the barest minimum, however. We should try to receive the Sacraments, most notably the Eucharist and Penance and Reconciliation, as often as we can in order to ask God for His mercy and the strength to avoid sin.