Four principles of conscience

This chapter presents the following key learning points:

- There are four principles of conscience
  - everyone is obliged to form their conscience
  - everyone is obliged to follow sincere conscience
  - conscience does not decide right and wrong
  - a good end does not justify immoral means.

Four important principles in developing conscience

It is important that people are able to hear and follow their conscience. It is a person’s conscience that enables them to take responsibility for their actions. The following principles are critical if people are to make right judgements that are based on reason and divine law.

Think about the last two weeks. In your journal describe a situation in which you took responsibility for your actions. Write about how you felt as a result.
First principle: everyone is obliged to form their conscience

Every area of human potential needs development. This means that, just as people need to develop their physical or intellectual potential, they also need to develop the potential of listening to and obeying their conscience. Everyone is obliged to form or mould their conscience by discipline, training and instruction.

Learning to distinguish between right and wrong
The first step in the development of any human gift is to learn and use necessary skills. Athletic gifts develop, for example, as people learn to use a range of physical skills.

The skill needed to develop a moral conscience is the ability to learn right from wrong. The first requirement for the formation of moral conscience is to learn the commandments of God as taught by Jesus.

Developing moral conscience through behaving morally
As with other human gifts, people develop a formed moral conscience by practising its use. This means:
• recalling God’s laws before acting, and working out the right thing to think, say or do
• recalling God’s laws after an event, and working out whether what they thought, said or did was right or wrong.

It can be difficult to obey moral conscience in practical daily life situations. People may feel pressured by peers, by the expectations of others, or by social trends and attitudes. People need to keep trying to become more aware of when such pressures are affecting them. They need to withdraw and to ‘take time out’. They need to think before they act.

It is also important to try and think ahead about the possible situations in which moral choices need to be made. It is much easier to do what is right when people can think ahead about the choices they have to make, and work out the right thing to do, that is, to practise the virtue of prudence.

When people can foresee situations in which they may be pressured to do wrong, they are better off avoiding them.
3. THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF CONSCIENCE

Think of a time when you were pressured to do wrong.

1. Why did you choose to act this way?
2. What alternatives did you have at the time?
3. What were the consequences of your choices?
4. Write a mission statement for yourself which sets out how you will try to remember God’s laws to help you work out the right things to say or do. As you are writing your mission statement, think about the situations you are better off avoiding in order to do what is right.

A mission statement is usually no longer than fifty words. Look at your school mission statement if you need a model.

**Is it ‘right’ if it ‘feels right?’**

Many people confuse ‘formed’ conscience with what ‘feels right’. They may say, ‘I should be free to follow my conscience’, when what they really mean is ‘I should be free to follow what I feel to be right’.

What ‘feels right’ is just a feeling; it is not formed conscience and needs to be given no more weight than any other feeling. Feelings can be misleading such as a groundless fear of the dark or irrational hatred in reaction to an imagined hurt.

People with formed moral consciences are able to do two things. They can:
• understand the moral principles behind a moral choice
• relate the principles to the actual situation in which the choice is being made.
### Second principle: everyone is obliged to follow sincere conscience

God created human beings to be good, and to always do what is right. Therefore, people are obliged by the Creator to obey what their conscience tells them is the right thing to do. This is true even if their conscience is mistaken, provided that the mistake is not made through some fault of the people concerned.

It should be noted that society does not always accept ‘conscience’ as suitable grounds for a person to deliberately violate the laws of the community. One such example is the treatment of a conscientious objector who refuses to fight in a time of war. Similarly, in a situation where a person refuses to obey a lawful command or where a genuine protest may result in property damage, society will not accept that the person is following their conscience. Whether through their own fault or not, and no matter how sincere they may think that they are, a person acting on formed conscience may well be seen as behaving in a way that conflicts with society’s generally accepted principles.

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**For your information…**

St Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest thinkers in human history, expressed the most basic of all moral principles as, ‘Good is to be done and to be sought after, and evil is to be avoided.’ *(compare with Psalm 34:14)*

Long before Aquinas, Jesus taught a higher principle that people should apply whenever moral judgement is needed. It is so important that it has become known as ‘The Golden Rule’: ‘Treat others as you would like people to treat you.’ *(Luke 6: 31)*

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**In Class Work**

1. Spend some time discussing what the principles in the ‘for your information box’ mean.
2. Try explaining the principles in your own words.
3. In groups develop slogans that have the same meaning as the ‘The Golden Rule’ that are relevant to young people today.
4. Display the slogans around your class.
For many reasons people can make mistakes about what is right and what is wrong.

Conscience can be mistaken

For many reasons people can make mistakes about what is right and what is wrong. They may be misinformed, lack good moral education or be pressured by circumstances. They may be unduly influenced by others or by bad habits.

People are obliged to do all they can to ‘form’ their conscience. They are also obliged to avoid, as far as possible, situations in which their emotions are likely to cloud their better judgement and their conscience. They are also obliged to recognise and to try to change bad habits and attitudes.

In Class Work

Name situations that illustrate where people might do the wrong thing whilst believing they are acting in good conscience.
Third principle: conscience does not decide right or wrong

Only God the Creator ultimately knows and determines what is right and what is wrong. The role of moral conscience is to discern whether a particular action conforms to God’s law and therefore is right or disobeys God’s law and is wrong.

Right and wrong, therefore, are not determined by conscience. The role of an individual’s conscience is to answer the questions:

• ‘Which moral principles apply to this situation?’
• ‘How do they apply?’
• ‘What should I do?’

No human person has the right to disobey God. Nor does anyone have the right to tell others that they may disobey God.

Sometimes a society or parliament makes laws which disobey God’s laws. In such cases, the Church finds it necessary to defend those who are harmed by such laws. For example, the Church has spoken out strongly in favour of:

• respect for international law, especially for the resolution of conflicts between nations, a fairer distribution of the world’s resources, and the humane treatment of refugees
• the rights of the unborn
• religious and other freedoms.

Even so, with the best intentions in the world, people can make honest mistakes in discerning what is right and wrong. When they do, they are in ‘good conscience’, because it is an honest mistake, but they will still do wrong unintentionally. The fact that they are following a mistaken conscience does not make their action right.

Across the world today, there are other examples of people in good conscience doing wrong. This is not to suggest that all who do these things are in good conscience – only those who sincerely do not know God’s laws can be in good conscience.

Four examples are:

• discrimination against people of other races
• not allowing women to participate properly in society by, for example, not allowing them to vote
• killing sick babies or female babies
• stoning adulterers to death.

These actions are wrong, even if those who commit them cannot see this.
Moral conscience, therefore, does not determine what is right or what is wrong. Conscience can only tell people whether they are intending to do what they believe to be right or wrong.

In Class Work

Research situations where people have not accepted society's commonly held moral principles but instead, have heroically followed their conscience, e.g. Otto Schindler and Chiune Sugihara. Stories about today's conscientious objectors may be found online at sites belonging to social justice groups such as Caritas, Ozspirit and UNIYA or in magazines such as 'Eureka Street' and 'Australian Catholic'.

Is this right for me?
As discussed earlier, good and bad, right and wrong, are taught by the Creator. This means that what is right for one is right for all: what is wrong for one is wrong for all. Right and wrong cannot vary in different situations.

It cannot be right for me, for example, to do wrong by deliberately causing harm to myself or to someone else, whether I can foresee or intend it or not. So there is no such thing as something being ‘right for me’ and wrong for others. Right and wrong do not depend upon the ideas of individuals or upon their consciences.

People can only say that: ‘As far as I can see, this word or action is the right thing for me to say or do’; or ‘As far as I can see, this is right in this situation’; or ‘My intention is good’.

Conscience, therefore, does not decide what is right or what is wrong for anyone. It can only help people to work out whether something they want to do is right or wrong. This highlights the importance of people doing all that is possible to educate or to ‘form’ their consciences.

Right and wrong do not depend upon the ideas of individuals or upon their consciences.
A person needs to consider not just a good end, but also the means or the way people go about achieving the good end.

Fourth principle: a good end does not justify immoral means

People usually have good intentions when they are faced with choices that require a moral judgement. Few people ever set out to do something that will deliberately harm others.

In every case that requires a moral judgement, a person needs to consider not just the good end, but also the means or the way people go about achieving the good end.

An example of a good end is putting a stop to bullying in a school. If students or staff decided that the best means for solving the problem of bullying in their school involved delivering threats to bullies, or actually using violence against them, their ‘solution’ would be immoral – even if it succeeded. A good end cannot be based on something that is wrong in itself, in this case threatening or actually using violence. Instead, nonviolent and moral strategies need to be used to deal with the issue and the bullies themselves.

Another example of a good end is to live simply and not waste the earth’s resources through over-consumption. If the means chosen to achieve this end involved destroying others’ property because the owners were seen to be wasteful – or worse, harming the owners themselves – a morally wrong choice will have been made.
Daily examination of moral conscience

The purpose of an examination of conscience is for an individual to discover whether or not they have behaved as God taught. Where they have, they need to give thanks. Where they have not, they need to ask for God’s forgiveness and for the help to change for the better.

People examine their conscience as they review past thoughts, words and actions. They try to:

• discover examples of when they have done what is right, such as acts of kindness, cooperation or forgiveness
• find examples of improvement in their lives where they are trying to change for the better
• identify deliberate thoughts, words or actions that were wrong
• recognise guilty feelings and work out whether or not they are justified.

People need to examine their consciences every day. This helps them in three ways:

1. It helps them to build upon their good behaviour and see if and where they may still need to change
2. It helps them to see that they have not disobeyed God and therefore do not need to feel guilty.
3. It helps them to prepare for death, which can come unexpectedly, and for the judgement of their lives by Christ after death. They can see where they have done wrong deliberately, and ask for God’s forgiveness.

People are encouraged to examine their conscience regularly, even daily. An examination of conscience is part of the preparation for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. The following form of examination of conscience is intended to help people to reflect on whether or not they have behaved as God taught.
AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

1. Place yourself in God’s presence and ask for help to be truthful and kind to yourself in this process.

2. Thank God for the day you have experienced.

3. Examine your day in the light of Jesus’ great commandments:
   Jesus said “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart…”
   
   • Do I pray regularly and try to establish and maintain my relationship with the God who loves me?
   • Have I allowed other things to replace God in my life – money, power, material possessions, sex?
   • Do I use the name of God or of Jesus in a disrespectful way?
   • Do I worship God regularly in a public way such as in the Mass each Sunday?
   
   Jesus said “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”
   
   • Do I respect and obey my parents?
   • How do I show my love for my parents and other members of my family?
   • Have I hurt anyone physically?
   • Have I bullied others or watched others being bullied and done nothing about it?
   • Have I done anything that could lead to harming someone – e.g. excessive use of alcohol, taking drugs?
   • Have I done anything to hurt myself physically?
   • Have I allowed my anger to lead me to hurt others?
   • Have I made peace with anyone I have hurt?
   • Have I tried to help those who are experiencing physical suffering?
How do I relate to other people? Do I respect them or do I use them for my own sexual gratification and pleasure?
Do I respect my own body as a temple of the Holy Spirit?
Have I taken anything that belongs to someone else?
Do I respect the environment and public property?
Have I cheated and claimed other’s ideas and writings as my own?
Have I told lies?
Do I gossip about others?
Can I be trusted with a secret?
Have I tried to destroy another person’s reputation?
Do I stand up for those who are unjustly accused?
Do I appreciate my own talents, qualities and possessions?
Do I entertain envious thoughts about the possessions and abilities of others and allow them to influence the way I treat people?
How have I used my talents, time and strength today to become a better person and to help others I have been with today?
Do I love? Do I ever hate?
Do I love and respect myself as God’s creation?
Do I love those close to me?
Do I love even my enemies as Jesus said?
Do I forgive others?

Pray for God’s forgiveness for any faults committed today and for the strength and courage to be a better person in at least one way tomorrow.
The basic human yearning

The more people recognise that doing what is right leads them into closer relationship with God, as well as to longer-term happiness, the more they want to avoid doing what is wrong. Yet it is not always easy to see how God’s laws apply in the world of today. This leads them to ask the question: ‘How do I recognise God’s call through my conscience to love and to do good?’

Use the information from Chapter 3 to answer Yes or No to the following statements:

1. To form a moral conscience means to decide what is right and wrong  Y / N
2. It is important to think ahead and so avoid occasions of sin  Y / N
3. I am free to follow my conscience means ‘I am free to do what feels right’  Y / N
4. A person is obliged to follow their conscience even if it mistaken  Y / N
5. God alone determines what is right or what is wrong  Y / N
6. As long as your intentions are good you are justified in not considering the facts  Y / N
7. Sometimes it is appropriate to commit ‘a necessary evil’ to achieve a good outcome  Y / N
8. An examination of conscience is not a test of the will but a study of one’s behaviour  Y / N