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Coordinating pastoral planning



Enhancing communications and networking



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Identifying and utilizing all resources which can be shared

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Our Conscience: A Gift from God A Reflective Journey through Lent

During these Lenten forty days of self-sacrifice, prayer, and discernment, we prepare together for the holiest celebration of our faith, the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is during this time of conversion and spiritual growth we take a closer look at how we are living our call to discipleship. Lent is, therefore, an important time to focus on our conscience, the inner voice of God speaking to our hearts. To allow this to happen, it is helpful to understand what our Church teaches about conscience, the formation of it, as well as, examining it throughout our life.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, (Article 6 # 1776 *Moral Conscience*), “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.”

“Conscience must be informed and moral judgment must be enlightened” (1783). “From the earliest years it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart” (1784). We are blessed with a sense of right and wrong, our conscience from the moment of infancy. “Our moral stirring begins a process that is deep within our heart and is prompted by grace (1453).

Our Church obliges us to form our conscience and then to follow it. It is no easy task. To discover and understand God’s will is one of the greatest challenges of our life. As a child, it seemed relatively easy; we took orders from our parents. As adults, we are called to internalize our moral decisions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: “Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgment less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law” (1787).

This process of struggling to discover God’s will in the midst of complex situations and sometimes contradictory human experiences is called the process of **discernment**. Because, as St. Paul reminds us, we

“The perfection of the moral good consists in persons being moved to the good not only by their will but also by their heart.”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church #1175)

cannot see God “face to face”, we constantly have to look for God’s will, knowing that even after the most profound discernment process, we will still have to act with a certain degree of uncertainty.

In this article, we are attempting to explore the five basic components of conscience formation:

1. Know Church teaching accurately and precisely.
 2. Respect of the teaching of Scripture.
 3. Consult experts.
 4. Integrate the decision-making process in the context of the community and our own lived experience.
 5. Pray – throughout the Process.
- This is not a step-by-step process. It is rather an ongoing process by which these five components of conscience formation are weighed and

integrated into a decision whereupon one experiences a sense of internal peace and serenity acting in accord with God’s will as taught by the Church and understood and accepted in our hearts and minds.

So we want to invite you to journey with us during this season of Lent. Explore how to make good decisions in the real issues of your personal life as well as issues impacting our country and our world. This document will probably create many questions for many of us. Let’s not be afraid to talk about it, to look for clarification and to deepen our understanding of what it means to “form our conscience and to follow our conscience.”

Component #1: Know Church Teaching Accurately and Precisely

Just suppose for a moment that the draft is reinstated and a twenty-year old son approaches a parent with concerns about fulfilling his responsibility to go to war. He is hesitant to obey the law because of his own confusion about the morality of war and needs guidance about how to make an authentic moral choice. How does a parent help him? This is one scenario created for discussion; most adults could list many others that are similarly complex and equally important.

This component is an attempt to explore how an adult Catholic Christian might begin to apply the first component of conscience formation: “**Know Church teaching accurately and precisely.**” It is a vital and necessary first step in the process of conscience for-

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- Sacred Heart of the Hills, Auburn Hills
- St. Andrew, Rochester
- St. Benedict, Waterford
- St. Irenaeus, Rochester Hills
- St. John Fisher, Auburn Hills
- St. Joseph, Lake Orion
- St. Mary's of the Hills, Rochester Hills
- St. Paul Albanian, Rochester Hills

Schools

- Holy Family Elementary, Rochester/Rochester Hills
- Marist Academy Lower Level
St. Benedict Campus, Waterford
- St. Joseph School, Lake Orion
- Marist Academy Middle School, Pontiac
- Notre Dame Preparatory, Pontiac

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mation. Unfortunately, it is not enough to go to the Web and “Google” our way through numerous documents and references.

What we call “Church teaching” is based on the long history of the Church over centuries as we have been applying Gospel teaching to concrete situations. The teachings of the Church expressed in many documents and other official forms of teaching from Councils and encyclicals need to be read and understood with a prayerful and open spirit. Church teaching needs to be seen within the larger context of our faith tradition.

Church documents need to be read with an open mind and heart. For example, the document on the issue of war and peace has become much more compelling since the bombing of Hiroshima and the awareness of the destructive power of nuclear armament; in 1983, American Bishops wrote a *Pastoral Letter on War and Peace*: “We are the first generation since Genesis with the power to virtually destroy God’s creation. We cannot remain silent in the face of such danger. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment; it is a requirement of our faith.”

Both the son and the parent need to be aware of as much of the “whole” of Church teaching as possible as an initial step in helping him make an authentic moral choice. How does one become aware of Church teaching? With the influx of technology, it is important to note at the beginning not everything that has “Catholic” in its title contains authentic and complete Church teachings. Is there a bibliography and does it contain references from rich traditions of our past, Vatican II and current encyclicals? (We must be careful not to over simplify any issue and settle for a purely legalistic response.) If one is reading a book containing Catholic teaching, it ought to have an “*Imprimatur*” which is the Church’s way of indicating

that this book is free from doctrinal error. The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) is a very good beginning for exploration. And finally one might consult with the “experts” on a diocesan or parish staff (priests and competently trained lay ministers) for direction to understand Church teaching.

Component #2: Respect of the Teaching of Scripture

One of the mandates of Vatican II on the renewal of moral theology was that it be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching: “Therefore, Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (cf. 1 Cor 1:20; 3:13; 4:6), commissioned the apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching” (Divine Revelation (II/7)). We’ve come to learn that potential choices for Christians must be judged in light of their appropriateness to the Christian story – to the perspectives, actions and intentions revealed in Jesus and recorded in the Sacred Scriptures. The more we are formed according to God’s Word, the more we grow in our ability to internalize and grasp the Christian story.

Using Scripture in moral decision-making is not as simple as quoting a specific line or verse to support a belief. Specific examples of moral teaching found in the Scriptures must be seen in the larger context of the entire message of Jesus, the values He lived and taught, and our entire salvation story in God. Scriptural moral imperatives about areas such as marriage, sexual ethics, social justice, and many others, must be examined in light of the total Gospel. While the Bible

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PAV Parish/School/Agency Leadership To Study True Stewardship

St. Mary of the Hills will host members of parish councils, school and agency boards, and pastoral ministers and staff from all areas of the Pontiac Area Vicariate on Monday, March 27, 2006 for a presentation on “True Stewardship – the meaningful involvement and engagement of people.” The featured speaker will be Bernard DuMond, Senior Associate, Institute of School & Parish Development (ISPD).

One might conclude that a presentation on “True Stewardship” would primarily focus on fund-raising programs. However, this is not the case. “True Stewardship” from ISPD’s perspective is not merely a program but an ongoing process that is constantly updated to help schools, parishes, agencies and institutions improve the viability of their organizations. Simply stated, ISPD’s Mission Statement reads, “Bringing People, Process and Ministry Together to build the Kingdom of God.”

ISPD perceives Total Stewardship as a gift from God: everything we are and have is freely given for our good. We should return a portion of these goods (our time, talent and treasure) to God and His work through the Church in gratitude for His abundant generosity. Stewardship is neither a secular term nor a code word for fund-raising. It is a way of life — the wise use of all that we are and have, knowing what we are and what we are becoming comes from God. As stewards, Christian living means that we view our resources of time, talent and treasure as gifts from God. We do not “possess” or “own” these resources, but are entrusted with them to nurture their growth and use them wisely. The way of life of stewardship means our resources must be used to reach out to others and build God’s Kingdom of love, justice and peace. ✱

Submitted by Bill Travnik, Vicariate Pastoral Council Representative from St. Mary of the Hills

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does not explicitly address some of the problems we face today such as the use of nuclear power or distribution of medical resources or some areas of medical ethics, we can still find guidance there by looking carefully at the questions addressed and the ideals held up as a standard for our behavior.

So, is it possible to use the Bible as a guide for moral decision making? Absolutely! It is the primary source for shaping our Christian imagination; it is also the context within which moral decisions make sense. While the Bible is far from a handbook of ready-made judgments we can immediately apply to current situations, it is certainly a map for discipleship and an invitation to enter into the Christian Story, the Life of Jesus. In the Scriptures, we listen closely to the words of Jesus, to the characters in the stories, and to the reaction of the people to whom the stories are addressed. We pay close attention to what Jesus said and did, what He cared about in each encounter and each situation, and why He and others reacted as they did. We ask what the story would affirm and challenge in its listeners, and what it challenges and affirms in us, as Christ's disciples today. By reflecting on and exploring these questions in the Scriptures, in communion with the wisdom and insight of the Church, we continue to form our conscience.

Component #3: Consult Competent Experts

As part of the process of conscience formation, we must consult experts who might also challenge our views or thinking and/or offer us additional insights. Those from the community that might impart knowledge or wisdom could include: priests, spiritual directors, doctors, counselors or mental health professionals, social workers or crisis counselors. Obviously, we want and need to hear the voice of the Lord speaking in and through the Church and its leaders and ministers; these are indeed the primary "experts" we consult. The fact that competent experts often disagree with one another forces us to weigh the arguments each expert proposes is important in forming the truly responsible conscience. Therefore our moral decision-making ought to bring us a clear conscience before God.

Component #4: Integrate the decision-making process in the context of the community and our own lived experience

Through the mystery of the Incarnation, we know that God is present in every aspect of our lives. This includes our own lived experience. While there is always a moral principle involved in every case, the discernment process also demands that we take into consideration the reality of our own experience, the lived experience of the Christian community and the impact

of our decision on others, especially on those the Scriptures call the powerless, the poor, the most vulnerable.

Component #5: Pray - The Power of Prayer throughout the Process

The Holy Spirit is ever present throughout the process of proper discernment. Through prayer as we continually empty ourselves and listen closely for promptings of the Holy Spirit, we are gradually drawn into closer union with God. Without this kind of prayer, any reflection on Church teachings, Scriptures, expertise and lived experience are incomplete. In fact, authentic prayer draws us to discover and value every way in which God guides us toward goodness and peace.

For us as Catholics, moral decision-making is not primarily a matter of obeying rules, applying norms, and rational analysis that, in some remote way, reflect God's will. Rather, we seek to discover God's will and desire for us in every situation throughout the total discernment process involving prayer at every step of the way. Sometimes, prayer may reveal to us that God is calling us to more than the demands of reason or laws, and even more than what Church teaching requires of us. The power of prayer throughout the process of forming a moral conscience guides us toward communion with God.

Conclusion

Since Vatican II, we've come to understand that Catholic moral life cannot be adequately understood merely as obedience to laws. As modern day disciples we are called to make a total response to God who generously offers life, love, and communion in Christ Jesus. Prior to Vatican II, we typically started with the question, "What is my duty?" But, today, we have grown to understand that God wants more from us. Today, we should ask the following question when making a moral decision, "What is God calling me to do and to be?" The answer to this question requires great patience in the process of prayerful discernment and reflection.

A well-formed conscience demands listening to revealed truths and has prayerfully reflected and honestly dialogued with experts. If we stop at our opinions only or follow the law in a non-reflective fashion, we have, in some way, not followed the full richness of the Church's teaching on conscience. Only after considering all options to the very best of our ability and in light of Church teaching, Scripture, consultation with experts, and our lived experience in the context of prayer, does one finally enter the sacred, holy space of conscience. There, in intimacy with God, one will finally arrive at a properly formed conscience and an abiding sense of peace. *

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