

Every Day CATHOLIC

ST. ANTHONY MESSENGER PRESS ■ www.AmericanCatholic.org ■ G0910 ■ SEPTEMBER 2010

THIS ISSUE:

Just Follow Your (Informed) Conscience

by Jim & Susan Vogt

Is it really that simple? Yes. No. Maybe! Yes, it's simple, but not quite *that* simple.

A woman steals food for her family when her unemployment runs out. A man decides not to report cash income on his taxes. When faced with moral decisions, people say that you must follow your conscience, and indeed that is what one must do. But how do we hear our consciences, and is it possible to follow one's conscience and still be wrong?

The Catholic Church teaches a principle called "primacy of conscience," which means that conscience is the ultimate authority and we're compelled to follow it: "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1790). We must also make the effort to have an "informed" conscience: "The education of the conscience is a lifelong task" (*CCC*, #1784). "To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent



people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts" (*CCC*, #1788). In other words, it's not just doing what feels good.

So how does a person develop a well-formed conscience? Here are some traps as well as positive steps to consider in coming to decisions of conscience.

Traps to conscience formation

1. Rationalization. When faced with paying income taxes, it's tempting to think, *Hey, rich people get big tax breaks. Is it really so wrong for me to fudge a little on my income tax return?* Sometimes we so strongly want to do something (or avoid doing something) that we talk ourselves into (or out of) it. We find ways to justify our actions even though an outsider would spot flaws in our logic.

2. Scrupulosity. Another trap is being scrupulous about the letter of the law while missing its spirit. When Susan was

a child, her godparents took her out for a lobster dinner every Good Friday. Technically, they kept the law of abstaining from meat, but a lobster dinner was hardly the sacrifice the law intended.

Sometimes avoiding scrupulosity might mean praying less formally or putting aside a man-made rule for the good of another person. This has pitfalls, of course, but when we are unsure, Scripture counsels that the final goal "is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5).

3. Going along with the crowd. How could so many people be wrong? For years, most adults didn't think twice about driving after drinking. Just because it's common doesn't make it right. When we're in the minority, we need to have the courage to make unpopular decisions and use our voices respectfully. Decisions are stronger when many different voices

continued on back page

"Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths." —Psalm 25:4

A Man for All Seasons

by Frank Frost

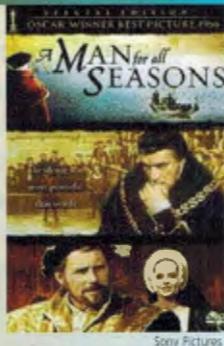
The 1966 movie *A Man for All Seasons*

has to be the classic conscience film. The reason it holds up so well is due in part to the high quality of the writing, acting and production values. The story, rooted in history, is timeless as it depicts moral integrity.

Sir Thomas More (Paul Scofield) is a lawyer known for his commitment to justice during the reign of King Henry VIII (Robert Shaw) in England. Henry desires to divorce his wife, Catherine, because she has not delivered a male heir, and he wants to marry Anne Boleyn. Henry demands the approval of his royal council. Most go along, but More declines on the basis of fidelity to what he holds true. More doesn't actively oppose the king; he seeks to find protection in silence. But in the end, that isn't enough.

Complications arise out of the king's conflict with the papacy (he declares himself head of the Church of England), malicious court intrigue and peer pressure from well-meaning friends who urge More to bend for the sake of fellowship. More's response: "When we die and you are sent to heaven for doing your conscience, and I am sent to hell for not doing mine, will you come with me for fellowship?"

While others recalibrate their consciences to suit a desired outcome, More cannot bring himself to act against his own conscience, even though he knows what consequences to expect: He will lose his position in the kingdom, his means of support—and ultimately his life. More's character doubtlessly appeals to us because of his precise thinking, eloquence and refusal to judge others. He's the very model of a person of conscience.



Robyn Gibson

by Joan McKamey

Making her parents proud was Robyn Gibson's childhood motivation for doing right and avoiding wrong. Naming her "amazing parents" as her first teachers, she says, "They were loving discipliners and had a huge influence on my early conscience formation."

As a religion teacher at JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano, California, Robyn now assists her senior Christian Morality students in their formation of conscience. She says, "I tell my students about my early college years, when I struggled with questions of right and wrong by myself. I compare them to the later years when I came to realize that God knows what's best for my life and that the teachings of the Church guide me to the truth.

"Many of my students struggle with difficult choices. My goal is to help them see that life doesn't have to be as hard as we make it out to be. If we try to figure it all out on our own, we might make mistakes and take the wrong road. I encourage them to take the easy road, trusting that God knows better than we do what's best for us."

Not all of her students are open to her instruction, though. Robyn says, "I get lots of pushback from students. Some of them may not be open to forming their consciences because they may not



have encountered God's love, so I respond to them with love. My favorite quote is from St. John of the Cross: 'Where there is no love, put love in, and you will draw love out.' I hope that encounter with God's love will open them to his teachings."

Robyn's work at JSerra isn't her first in the area of conscience formation. She worked for Elizabeth New Life Center teaching abstinence to public high school students in Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio. She says, "Many of the students hadn't even considered abstinence an option. It's written in their hearts to know better; they just need permission. I encouraged them to listen to their natural desire for what's good, like being loved and treated well."

Robyn is a beautiful, young, single woman. She's convincing because she tells them, "I wait out of choice." One girl told Robyn that she was going to break up with her boyfriend, who'd been pressuring her to have sex. The young woman said, "You told me I don't have to, that it's O.K. to wait."

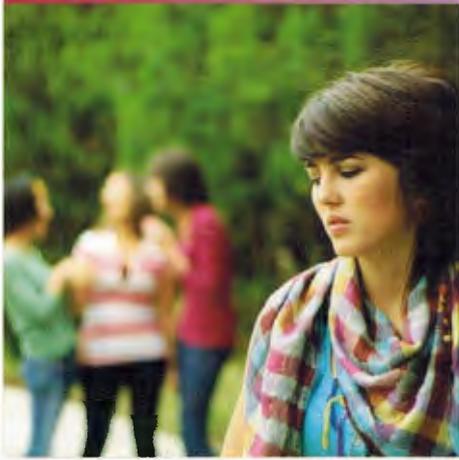
Robyn also worked at Family Theatre Productions in Los Angeles, California, promoting media that's good for the soul. Her primary duty was to organize the student film festival. This honored young filmmakers whose movies promote the dignity of the human person.

One of the most important messages about conscience that Robyn tries to convey through her work is that "conscience is not a feeling. The proper thing may not feel good; it may be painful or difficult." She also makes it clear that "one's conscience is never fully formed. We need to be strengthening it always."

MOVIE MOMENTS, CONT'D.

Next time you watch *A Man for All Seasons*, ASK YOURSELF:

- Why was the law so important to Sir Thomas More?
- What are some of the many different ways More manifested his integrity in dealing with Cardinal Woolsey, Richard, the Duke of Norfolk, his family?
- What are some occasions when I'm aware that my conscience trumps my desires?



©Stockphoto/Daniel Avilés

Setting Moral Boundaries

by Jeanne Hunt

Scenario

If everyone else jumped off a bridge...?" Maureen shouts at Jennifer, her 15-year-old daughter. The words come out in her frustration and disappointment over Jen's latest escapade. Once more, Jennifer has made a poor moral choice.

Jumping off bridges is not the right question, yet Maureen wonders what to do with this child who has no use for Mom's old-fashioned values.

A response

The good news is that it's never too late to impose moral boundaries on a child. The sooner parents begin, the better. Children understand "time out" as the process for thinking through bad and good choices. As soon as a two-year-old can say "no," it's time to create a spot for taking time out.

Parents must teach their children what's right and what's wrong. As children become preteens and adolescents, this should be taken up a notch. Parents must work together to determine what's acceptable behavior and what's not. Family meetings should be held to discuss the boundaries and how successful the family has been at keeping the family rules.

When a rule is broken, the child should know the consequences. Parents should communicate in advance what consequences will take effect. Now comes the hard part: Both parents need to be

consistent and support one another in enforcing boundaries. If Dad's a soft touch and can't abide punishing his princess, then Mom will have to ensure that consistent consequences are enforced.

The goal is to form our children as conscientious, moral adults who understand that doing the right thing creates order, goodness and peace and that doing the wrong thing destroys them. Too many adults never learn that lesson and never develop any regard for the effects of their actions. It isn't comfortable or easy to be consistent when enforcing moral behavior with adolescents. But it's one of the most important gifts parents can give to their children.

Maureen, John (her husband), Jennifer and her sisters sit down for their first family meeting. It feels awkward at first, but Maureen insists they give it a try. Maureen and John begin by setting the boundaries with a list of their own version of the Ten Commandments. Jennifer adds a few of her own and, for the first time in months, everyone seems to be on the same page. There are even a few moments of laughter as they pledge to keep one another on the moral track.

PRAYER

Planting Seeds of God's Law

by Jeanne Hunt

(for praying alone or with others)

Preparation: Place a bowl containing large seeds (such as bean seeds), a candle, a crucifix and an open Bible on a prayer table.

OPENING SONG

"Seek Ye First" (or similar hymn)

OPENING PRAYER

Divine Sower, we long to know you as our companion and intimate friend. Guide and keep us. You are a gentle judge who brings mercy and compassion as you lead us in the ways of righteousness. Plant your law within our hearts. Give us the grace to walk in your ways. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

RITUAL

These seeds are signs of God's law planted in our hearts and of the laws we find difficult to keep. Let us pause to reflect on which of God's laws is our delight and easy to follow (*pause*) and which laws cause us to stumble (*pause*).

Come forward now and claim two seeds: one symbolizing the law you have always loved and which is

planted in your heart and one representing what you would like God to plant in your heart. After taking your seeds, stand for a moment before the Christ candle and crucifix and ask God to do some planting for you today.

As you leave this gathering, put the seeds in a place where you will see them as you work to live God's law in your life.

CLOSING SONG

"Seek Ye First" (or similar hymn)

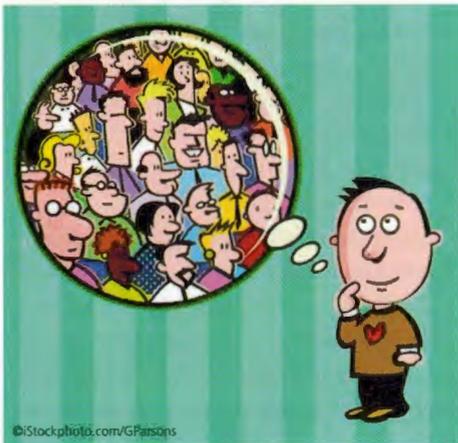


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are considered, but conscience is the final arbiter.

4. If it feels good, do it. Conscience shouldn't be guided solely by emotion. Following it may not coincide with happiness—at least not fleeting feelings of bliss. Eating half a dozen doughnuts may feel good—temporarily—but this affects one's long-term health. Conversely, taking medicine or studying for a test might not be pleasant but is conscientious. A feeling of uneasiness may be our conscience warning us, but feeling happy



doesn't necessarily mean an action is O.K. Sometimes the best action might be restraint.

5. It's my body; it's my business. Just because I'm not directly harming another person doesn't mean my action is good. Drug addiction or pornography may seem like victimless crimes, but they not only hurt the doer, they also weaken the moral fabric of society.

Steps to forming a Christian conscience

The STOP method is an easy-to-remember framework for checking one's conscience.

S – Study. Decisions of conscience begin with knowledge. It's not a matter of being smart, but of making serious efforts to learn the facts from credible sources, such as reading what the Church teaches and consulting experts in the field. Don't just go on hearsay or Internet blogs.

T – Think Together. It's best not to make decisions in isolation. A married couple shouldn't make an important moral decision without discussing it and coming to something mutually agreeable. In faith

communities, this means testing out the options with other believers and seeking consensus before making a decision. In both situations, it involves evaluating and weighing the information gathered in the Study phase.

O – Others' Experiences. Wisdom is also carried by others who have had experience with the issue. Consulting others whose experience has led them to different conclusions is a helpful way to sort out our rationalizations. Don't listen only to people with whom you agree.

P – Pray. Important decisions should always be brought to prayer so that we can check our rationalizations and be honest before God. Prayer provides us time to listen and sort. It's not the same as waiting for a magical sign from God, but rather noticing if we're at peace with the emerging decision.

Criteria for well-formed decisions

Done all the steps? Checked for traps? Still not sure? This quick version of conscience formation could be summed up by asking oneself two other questions: Is my contemplated decision life-giving? Is it generous? A well-formed conscience doesn't simply apply rules but brings the whole self to the decision and weighs how each decision will affect the common good.

Decisions are meaningless without actions. Sometimes it can feel satisfying just to keep thinking, sorting, weighing and praying. There are times, however, when a person of conscience has to act in a public way. For example, a whistle-blower may risk a job in order to bring attention to a faulty product or dishonest superiors. Writing letters to the editor or attending a public demonstration against unjust policies takes time and stretches our comfort level. Sometimes complaining can be the lazy alternative to investing the self-discipline it takes to come up with a concrete plan. Ah, what cost discipleship!

Permission to Publish received for this article, "Just Follow Your (Informed) Conscience" by Jim and Susan Vogt, from Rev. Joseph R. Binzer, Vicar General, Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 5-13-2010.

NEXT MONTH'S TOPIC:
Annulment

MAKING CONNECTIONS

When have you made a moral decision without consulting or informing your conscience? What are the most difficult traps to conscience formation that you've encountered?

How well-formed is your conscience?

What will you do differently the next time you're faced with a big moral decision?

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Cincinnati, OH 45202
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