CHURCH DOCUMENTS ON CONSCIENCE

Gaudium et spes – Vatican II  December 7, 1965

16. In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

1777 Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.

1778 Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law:

Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; I mean that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise. . . . [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.

Erroneous Judgment

1790 A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.
This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man "takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin." In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits.

Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct.

If - on the contrary - the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience.

A good and pure conscience is enlightened by true faith, for charity proceeds at the same time "from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith."

The more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by objective standards of moral conduct.

Dignitatis Humanae – Vatican II December 7, 1965

3. Further light is shed on the subject if one considers that the highest norm of human life is the divine law- eternal, objective and universal- whereby God orders, directs and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community by a plan conceived in wisdom and love. Man has been made by God to participate in this law, with the result that, under the gentle disposition of divine Providence, he can come to perceive ever more fully the truth that is unchanging. Wherefore every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means.

Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.

Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it.

On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious. The reason is that the exercise of religion, of its very nature, consists before all else in those internal, voluntary and free acts
whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either
command or prohibit acts of this kind. The social nature of man, however, itself requires that he
should give external expression to his internal acts of religion: that he should share with others in
matters religious; that he should profess his religion in community. Injury therefore is done to the
human person and to the very order established by God for human life, if the free exercise of
religion is denied in society, provided just public order is observed.

There is a further consideration. The religious acts whereby men, in private and in public and out
of a sense of personal conviction, direct their lives to God transcend by their very nature the
order of terrestrial and temporal affairs. Government therefore ought indeed to take account of
the religious life of the citizenry and show it favor, since the function of government is to make
provision for the common welfare. However, it would clearly transgress the limits set to its
power, were it to presume to command or inhibit acts that are religious.

14. In order to be faithful to the divine command, "teach all nations" (Matt. 28:19-20), the
Catholic Church must work with all urgency and concern "that the word of God be spread abroad
and glorified" (2 Thess. 3:1). Hence the Church earnestly begs of its children that, "first of all,
supplications, prayers, petitions, acts of thanksgiving be made for all men.... For this is good and
agreeable in the sight of God our Savior, who wills that all men be saved and come to the
knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4). In the formation of their consciences, the Christian
faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church
is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and
authoritatively to teach, that truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her
authority those principles of the moral order which have their origins in human nature itself.
Furthermore, let Christians walk in wisdom in the face of those outside, "in the Holy Spirit, in
unaffected love, in the word of truth" (2 Cor. 6:6-7), and let them be about their task of spreading
the light of life with all confidence and apostolic courage, even to the shedding of their blood.

The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ, his Master, ever more fully to
understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it,
ever-be it understood-having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the
Gospel. At the same time, the charity of Christ urges him to love and have prudence and patience
in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith. All is to be
taken into account-the Christian duty to Christ, the life-giving word which must be proclaimed,
the rights of the human person, and the measure of grace granted by God through Christ to men
who are invited freely to accept and profess the faith.