

## Primacy of Conscience:

### A person's "most secret core and sanctuary"

The conscience is the whole self trying to make judgments about who one ought to be and what one ought to do or not to do. It is a person's "most secret core and sanctuary" where one is "alone with God." Traditionally the conscience is the person's final, or supreme, arbiter of right and wrong. Its judgments must be followed because they reflect convictions and internalized values that set the boundaries within which one acts with integrity. To say, "My conscience tells me" means, "I hold this conviction as true and must live by it lest I betray my truest self." What we hold to be true is developed over time and not something that we just decided upon.

The moral awareness of the obligation to be good and to do what is right is not imposed from without, but it arises from within our being. To transgress internalized boundaries of value and conviction would be to lose integrity. Moral conscience, then, is not a feeling or a special faculty; nor is it the unconscious superego.

The formation of the conscience is a community achievement. While the judgment of conscience is always made for *oneself* (what *I* must do), it is never formed by oneself. Convictions are shaped, and obligations are learned, within the communities that influence us. The freedom to follow one's judgment of conscience presupposes that one has *sincerely* searched for the moral truth pertaining to the issue one is facing. Catholics are to give the presumption of truth. The goal of forming conscience is to commit one's freedom to what is right and good so that, in judging and acting, one identifies with what one does. The moral decision becomes a commitment of the self to value.

The traditional teaching on the sanctity and dignity of conscience is not only that conscience can go astray without losing its dignity, but also that one must follow even an erring conscience that one has taken reasonable care to inform. The mature conscience takes responsibility before God for its judgment. It does not pin one's soul on another, and so abdicate responsibility.

Following conscience requires that one searches for truth, discerns what is right and good, and then acts according to what one understands that truth to be. In this way, following conscience is being true to the call from the “core and sanctuary” of one’s heart where one is “alone with God.”

The Church will be open until midnight on Monday, Nov. 1, following the Mass for All Souls at the Waveland Cemetery. All are welcome to come and sit “alone with God.”