

A CALL FOR A MATURE CONSCIENCE

“I ask: Is it legitimate, is it right, to eliminate a human life to resolve a problem?”

– Pope Francis

The Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* ended a half-century guarantee of federal constitutional protection of abortion rights and allowed each state to decide whether to restrict or ban abortion. That decision has polarized our society, communities and even our families into groups that are “for” or “against” abortion, resulting in heated discussions, or lack of discussion out of desire to avoid conflict. But, how should we, as Catholics and people of faith respond? It requires far deeper reflection than the simplistic statements we hear from politicians or TV commentators: “I’m for it.” or “I’m against it.” or “I think a woman should...”

As Catholics we are called to act in accord with the moral law (the law inscribed by God in the soul of every human being), and Catholic social teaching reflects this law. Applied to the controversy over the Supreme Court decision we can first turn to the Church’s teaching as found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2271): *“Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law.”* This is because, to do otherwise, violates the moral law against killing and the Church’s social teaching regarding the value of life and human dignity, which includes the tenet that life begins at conception.

This illustrates that the conflict existing between those of faith and those who are for abortion is rooted in the values embraced, and in turn, the values to which our consciences guide. This is not to suggest that those who are “for abortion” lack conscience—I believe those holding that position truly believe they are acting with good conscience and desire to preserve freedom. The question is, how mature is our conscience and to what values are our consciences guided? It is here that I would like to start my reflection—not strictly about abortion, but about the many life decisions we face. **As people of faith and Catholic Christians, we are always called to form in ourselves a mature conscience and to act in accord with the moral law.** Although this may seem antithetical to freedom since it seems to place bounds on our behavior, society must actually embrace a maturing of conscience to effectively function and preserve freedom. What do I mean by this? Let’s start by examining conscience.

To define a conscience, we could use psychological terminology and say that **conscience is the equivalent of the ability to self-regulate our morality** (e.g. our ability to act morally). To put it simply, when we talk about conscience, we are talking about such a human ability by which we can distinguish good from evil. To act based on this distinction is to make judgments about what is good and evil and to feel the so-called moral emotions associated with our decisions like pride in doing something we thought was important or feeling guilty and ashamed when we didn’t reach the norms that we set for ourselves which we designated or considered important. To say it more simply, **conscience is a kind of an inner compass that tells us where good is and where there is evil.** That compass commands us to move toward good and avoid evil. Always!

The problem is that we are not born with a moral compass ready to act. Psychology tells us that we are born impulsive, not moral. At an early stage of development, conscience is not yet formed enough such that the child knows what is good and what is bad. The child always assimilates from

his parents the norms of good and evil. What the parents called good and what the family called evil, becomes the morality of the child, but this is an **anxious-prescriptive morality**—one that is assimilated out of fear of losing love or receiving punishment from authority. If a child meets their parents' expectations of morality, it is rewarded; when a child exceeds the norms, it is punished. For that reason, morality is always first internalized in human development through identification with the values, norms, prohibitions and precepts of the caregiver and, more broadly, society. But this is not a conscience.

Conscience is that which guides our behavior in accord with values, not fear or reward. How mature our conscience becomes depends on the degree to which we develop morally (the degree to which we embrace moral law as our value system). Thus, it is our level of personal development (or under-development) that dictate our behaviors and the resultant ability of our society to function effectively. In our age and time – especially in our society—we see the tendency in our population to claim our individual rights but in doing so we are forgetting the fact that we are much more dependent on each other than we think. Whatever we do individually always has wider repercussion. If I do well, the world is better. If I act badly, even if this evil supposedly concerns only me, it affects the world. Because our society is largely focused on individual rights, rather than a higher ordered set of values that transcend our own personal desires and place import on intrinsic good for all, dysfunction and division occur.

As persons of faith, we are called to internalize values derived from the moral law to foster a more mature conscience: **I am moral not because I'm afraid** (of a sin, eternal damnation, etc. – this does not convince anymore), **but because I think it is good** (wanting to act in accord with the moral law because I believe that is best for me and the functioning of a free society as a whole). In our faith, **a mature conscience is one that guides our behavior and decisions in accord with the moral law as codified in the values and themes of Catholic Social Teaching**: Value of Life and Human Dignity; Dignity of Work; Community and the Common Good; Stewardship of Creation; Rights and Responsibilities; Global Solidarity; Option for the Poor and Vulnerable; Proper Role of Government; Participation in Society; Promotion of Peace. **Such a mature conscience acts in accord with values beyond what may most materially benefit us personally or offers us optimal comfort, but rather yield the greatest good for humanity and society.** Because this maturity of conscience runs contrary to a focus on individual rights and interests, it meets with resistance. In fact, Jesus warned that being faithful would meet with resistance: *“From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”* (Lk 12: 52-53). While we should handle such division lovingly—it does not need to be a heated argument but rather a common quest for moral truth—it is not easy, right?

And so, a mature conscience is a rarity. **I see the need in our society, especially these days, for a call to maturity of conscience.** I personally would like to plead—especially in our community—for a mature conscience that is guided by an imperative regardless of consequences. A conscience that guides: I know what is good, I do it regardless of whether I am rewarded or punished, respected, or rejected, or whether I will need to sacrifice a lot because of making that decision. That would be an ideal to which most of humanity could aspire. If that was the case, and most people

on this planet had a mature conscience, this world would look different. **Right now, the world is as it is, not because most people are evil, but because they make problematic choices believing that they are right, or fail to speak up out of fear of rejection.**

For me personally as a human being, and as a person of faith and a priest, the Catholic Church, which is my spiritual home, is of tremendous help in this time of polarized opinions. The Church emphasizes the *freedom of conscience* as the guarantor of human freedom. It is in conscience that we can accept or reject God, and in place of conscience we cannot substitute anything else, because it is conscience that distinguishes us from animals. Because we have freedom, we must constantly make moral choices to maintain the health of our society and preserve freedom.

In closing, **we need conscience to be moral beings.** We are social beings, but to live in communities we must be able to formulate certain norms of functioning and enforce them. That means **focusing not only on my own interests, but also the interests of other people, and being able to make choices that consider more than just my own perspective.** Conscience is a human potential and its development and maturity depend on the interaction with other individuals and with the environment. I personally believe in freedom and love living in the “land of the free” but I’m not a believer in absolute freedom that allows us to define ourselves. We need to become moral beings, adhering to values beyond our own self-interest, and that’s why I see the need for **a call for a mature conscience** in our communities, families, and society at large. That mature conscience will enable us to hopefully make the right/moral choices in our lives.

Blessings,
Fr. Tad