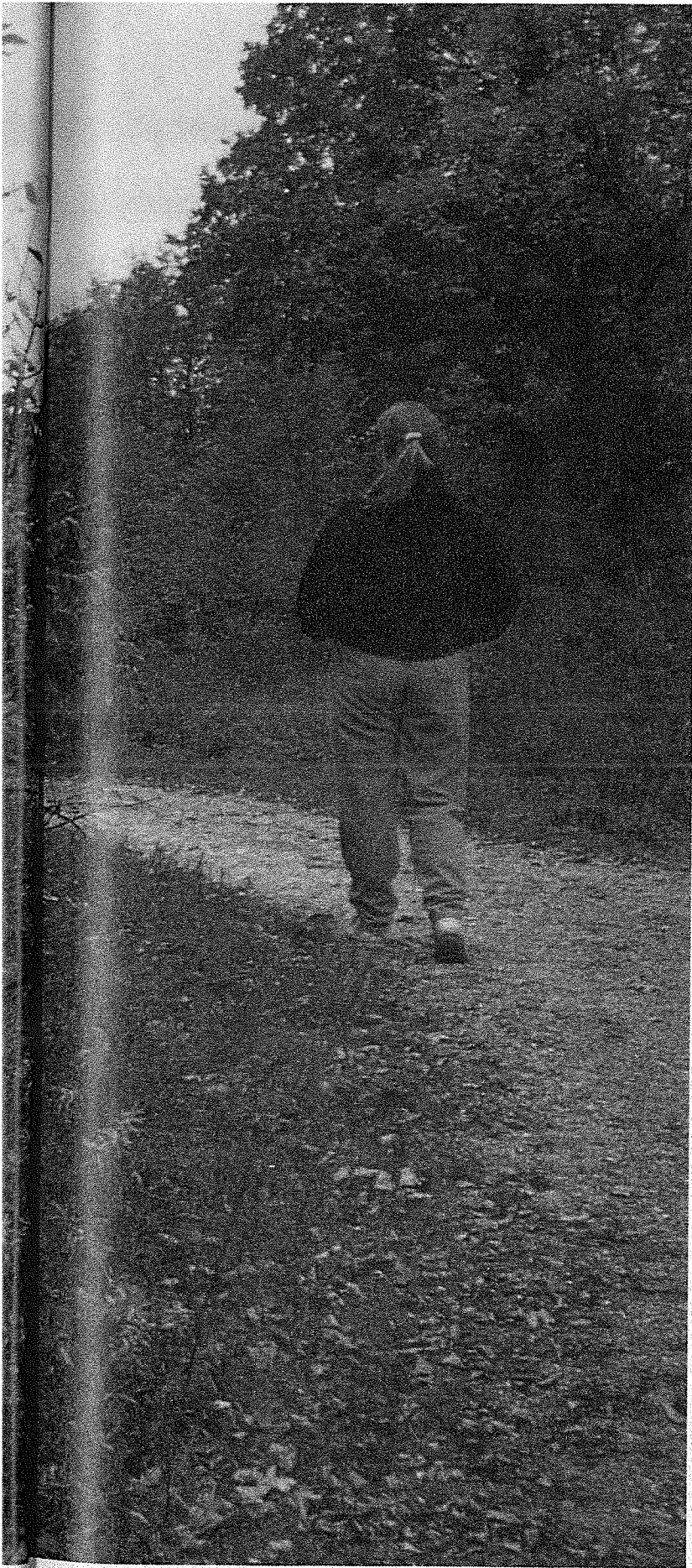


# Chapter 3

# Conscience

## Overview questions

1. What are some of the common theories about what conscience is?
2. What is the Catholic Christian understanding of conscience?
3. What is really meant by being free to follow your conscience?
4. What kinds of personal attitudes interfere with, or support, conscience?
5. What kinds of things influence your conscience?
6. How can you best search for the truth and make correct moral decisions?



**Prayer**

*Spirit of Wisdom,  
So many choices face us  
today, and so many  
things and people pull  
us in all directions.*

*Help me to not be a  
pushover, easily swayed.*

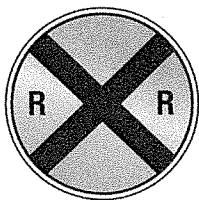
*Help me keep my  
conscience alive so it  
doesn't become dull to  
the pain and misery of  
others or to the great  
harm caused by doing  
wrong.*

*Guide me to use my head  
to make my decisions  
wisely.*

*Lead me in your direction.*

**intuition**

a quick perception or understanding, without recourse to reasoning



## What is conscience?

People are fond of saying “Let your conscience be your guide.” But do we know what that means? What is conscience? Can your conscience ever be wrong? How can you tell what your conscience is telling you? These things confuse many people. So this chapter will discuss conscience—what it is, what influences it, and how we can make the right decisions by using our conscience. First, we need to identify our present ideas of conscience.

**Conscience survey**

1. What do you think conscience is?

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2. When you speak of “following your conscience,” what do you mean?

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3. Do you think a person’s conscience can ever be wrong? (Remember what you discussed about subjective and objective reality and morality.)

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4. How can you tell whether your conscience is directing you toward what is right?

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## Common conscience theories

There are many theories about what conscience is. Here is your opportunity to evaluate critically for yourself some of the more common ones.

**The “hunch”**

When asked why they think a certain action or decision is the right or wrong one, many people simply respond, “I just **know** it is,” or “Something just tells me it is,” or “I’m **sure** it is,” or “I just **feel** right (or wrong) about it.” But when asked **why** they feel or think this way, they have trouble giving specific reasons. To them conscience is intuition—a built-in hunch about what is right or wrong.

**“Doing what comes naturally”**

Some people believe we’re all born with moral instincts which automatically tell us the right or wrong thing to do in every situation. Most everyone respects things like honesty, sincerity, justice, kindness, and human dignity. Therefore, some people reason, if we all just “do what comes naturally”—instinctively, we will be doing the right thing. Simply by relying on our basic instincts, we can find specific answers even to complex moral dilemmas. This view is **not**, however, the same as belief in a **natural law** (which we will discuss in another chapter) by which we can distinguish **in general** between good and evil, right and wrong.

### The “little voice”

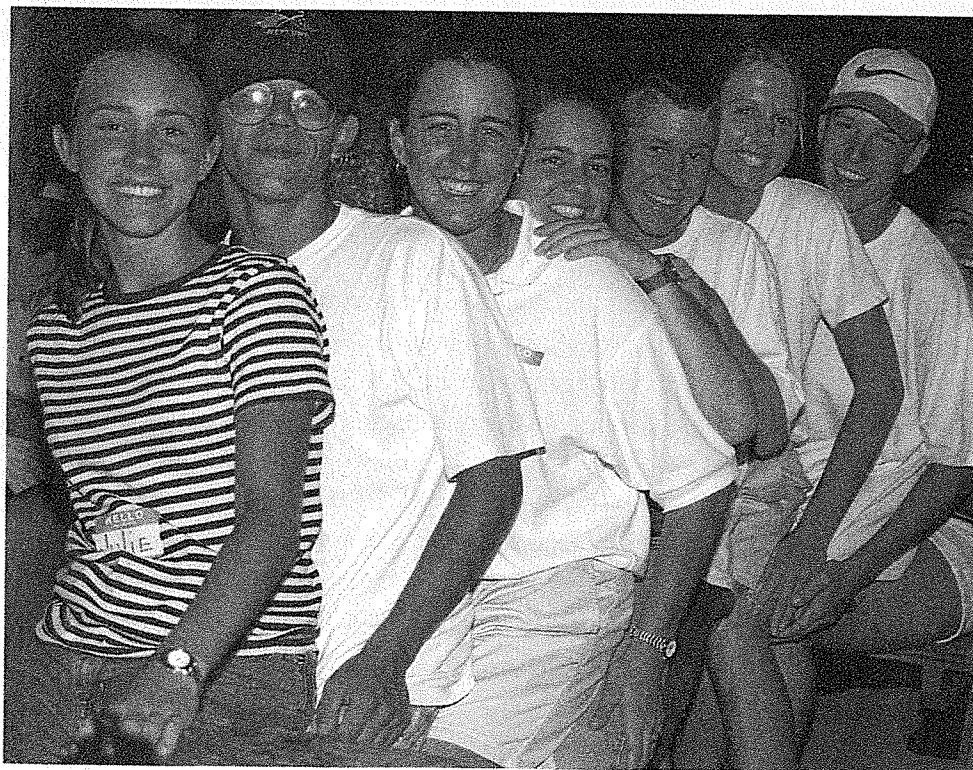
Others view conscience as an interior voice that tells us exactly what to do—a higher force or power that inspires us with the specific answer in each moral situation. Perhaps an angel whispers the good choice in one ear, while in the other ear the devil tempts us to make the wrong choice (“The devil made me do it”). Or maybe it’s God’s voice that “speaks” to us. People who subscribe to the “little voice” theory can’t seem to give specific **reasons** for their moral decisions. Often they simply say, “I just **know** that’s what God wants,” or “It’s God’s will,” or “Something is **telling** me that’s what is right (or wrong).” One’s task, as they see it, is merely to obey the “voice” one hears.

### “Follow the crowd”

Another common conscience theory holds that what society considers right and wrong should determine one’s personal moral response. If enough people think something is right or wrong, then it must be: “Everybody else does it,” “The majority can’t be wrong,” “Who am I to argue with everybody else?” In making moral decisions, persons who subscribe to this theory rely heavily on the opinion of others.

### “Follow-up feelings”

Many people think conscience is how you feel **after** you decide or do something, or after you’ve actually done it. If you feel good after you’ve done something, then you know you’ve done the right thing. If you feel bad or guilty, then you know that what you did must have been wrong. To decide what’s right or wrong, just anticipate beforehand how you will feel later about it. If you feel good about what you are considering doing, then the course of action is right. If you feel bad or guilty about your contemplated decision or action, then your conscience is telling you that the action is wrong and you shouldn’t do it—or so these people believe.



*Following the crowd can be risky. When we rely on the opinion of others in making moral decisions, we are accepting their values.*

*The world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.*  
OMAR N. BRADLEY

### Reflection

1. How often do you take some quiet time to reflect on the kind of person you are and would like to be?
2. Do you ever hesitate to do this for fear of what you might see?



### Activity

For the next week, at the end of each day, take a minimum of five minutes alone in a quiet place to review the good and the wrongs you've done in the day. Consider how your decisions reflect on who you are as a person and how they affect you. Conclude by talking with God about it.

At the end of the week, write a statement in your journal summarizing what you've learned about yourself.

## The "no conscience" theory

Some think there is no such thing as conscience. Conscience, they figure, is just an idea religions have made up to keep us all in line by making us feel guilty about certain things. Those who believe there's no such thing as conscience believe people can be **legally** guilty of breaking laws, but that there's no such thing as moral guilt or violating one's conscience. Often they also believe we're all programmed by our upbringing, heredity, and/or environment to act in certain ways. So you're not free to make your own moral choices—you just can't help doing what you do.

### For discussion

1. Take each common conscience theory and project what would happen if everyone followed each theory in making moral decisions.
2. Take each common conscience theory and project what might happen if the president used that theory to decide whether or not to engage this country in a nuclear war.
3. Would you vote for someone who believes there is no such thing as conscience? Explain.
4. What do you think is the main problem with each of the "common conscience theories"? Explain.

## The Christian understanding of conscience

Whenever you've gotten angry that an injustice was done to you, or thought positively about something good you did for someone, you have been exercising your conscience (maybe without realizing it). Conscience enables you to discern and evaluate whether an action is good or evil. It's what tells you deep down inside: "That's outrageous—it's wrong!" "That's not fair!" or "That was a truly good and courageous thing to do." "This is what it means to have somebody really love you and care about what happens to you."

God has given us life and freedom with just one condition—that we must love. In practical terms, this means we are to do good and avoid what is evil. Genuine love (which is God's own nature) always seeks only what is good. To help us love, God has given us each a conscience and the obligation to follow it.

But what is conscience? Catholic belief holds that **conscience is the ability to reason to and distinguish truth and goodness from wrong or evil.** Using your conscience, then, is not a matter of relying on hunches, instincts, little voices, feelings alone, or what others do. **It is using your head to figure out what you prayerfully and honestly think is the best, most loving thing to do in a given situation.**

Our conscience, then, is what lights our way—shows us how we are to love God and others, and how to avoid what damages this love. Conscience is the most sacred, deepest heart of ourselves. There, alone with God, we confront who we really are. Listening to your conscience, then, requires listening to yourself. It means taking the time to look inward and examine whether you honestly are doing the right thing, or are just letting circumstances or others lead you into becoming a kind of person you don't really want to be.

## For discussion

1. How do you think the Christian understanding of conscience compares with the "common conscience theories" discussed previously? Explain.
2. What do you think would happen if everyone followed this understanding of conscience in making moral decisions? Why?
3. What would you think if the president made major national decisions based on this understanding of conscience? Why?
4. Can you think of any conscience theories besides those discussed? If so, explain.
5. Which understanding of conscience makes the most sense? The least? Why?

## Freedom of conscience

We are each obliged to follow our conscience faithfully. To freely choose and act based on your properly formed and **informed conscience** is your privilege and your right as a human. The Catholic Church strongly believes that this is how we discover truth and draw closer in love to God. Thus the Catholic Church stresses that nobody should be forced to act against his or her conscience, or prevented from acting according to his or her conscience—especially in religious matters.

As we develop our ability to think, reflect, and exercise clearer and more objective judgments, our conscience matures. But in learning to make wise moral judgments, reasoning alone isn't enough. Our conscience must also be well-formed in other ways. The more we deliberately **do** the right thing, for instance, the more aware we become of the right thing to **do**. Finally, to develop our conscience correctly, we also need to

- pray for God's guidance as we try to discern right from wrong
- consult with others where warranted and listen to wise advice
- increase our ability to understand others, empathize with them, and feel compassion
- consider, as Christians, how Jesus' teachings and example should affect our life
- understand and apply, as Catholics, what the Church teaches about moral matters

Catholic teaching likewise cautions us to remember these rules that always apply in every moral situation:

## The rules of conscience

1. Act toward others the way you would want them to behave toward you (the Golden Rule).
2. Respect others, and do nothing that would damage their conscience or cause them to do wrong.
3. You may never do evil in order to accomplish good.

## For discussion

1. How important do you think conscience is? Why? Why do Catholics consider conscience so important?
2. What does the Catholic Church teach about the freedom to exercise one's conscience? How is this freedom generally respected? How is it commonly violated?
3. How does our conscience mature? Why and how must we develop our conscience?
4. In your own words, explain the "rules of conscience." Why do you think each is important? What additional rule would you recommend people follow? Why?

## Journal entry

Describe your understanding of conscience and how conscience helps you make moral decisions.

## informed conscience

decision-making ability which has the proper input; correct conscience

*This above all:  
to thine own self be  
true, and it must follow,  
as the night the day,  
thou canst not then be  
false to anyone.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,  
"HAMLET."

**DON'T  
EVEN  
THINK  
ABOUT  
IT!**

**LOVE  
AND DO  
WHATEVER  
YOU WANT**  
— St.  
Augustine

## Missile crisis

Discuss the following case and respond to the questions. The scenario is hypothetical, but is based on the kinds of crisis drills which do occur at top government levels in order to refine the decision-making process. Some of the facts presented are based on various officials' assessments of what might occur in such a situation.

*As the U.S. Secretary of Defense, you have just been told that a missile has been launched against the United States from somewhere in Country X—a country known to harbor terrorists, to have nuclear weapons, and to have the ability to successfully launch nuclear weapons toward their intended intercontinental targets. You have also been informed that*

- *The missile en route contains a nuclear warhead.*
- *It is targeted toward a densely populated U.S. city.*
- *An effort to shoot down the missile might not succeed and, if it doesn't, over two million people will die.*
- *If more nuclear missiles are launched from Country X, some will surely strike their targets.*
- *If the United States launches a first strike at Country X, then Country X will probably respond by firing more missiles at U.S. targets.*

*Immediately after learning about the missile, you receive word that Country X has just sent the president an urgent message, saying that the missile launch has been a terrible mistake. The message attributes the launch to a group of radicals who somehow were able*



*to buy from the underground market the plutonium needed to build a single weapon. It says that Country X itself has no hostile intentions toward the United States and will cooperate fully in trying to catch and punish the rebels who are responsible.*

*Attempts have been made to reach Country X's leaders by telephone and satellite transmission, but communications appear jammed. Country X's diplomat in Washington says she knows nothing about the missile launch, but insists that it must be "a horrible mistake."*

*It is your job to brief the president on:*

- *what is going on*
- *what the options are*
- *your recommended course(s) of action*

*Your greatest enemy now is time. The president has less than thirty minutes to make a decision about how to respond. As one official tells you, "This is serious, sobering business."*

### For discussion

1. *What are the greatest dangers involved here?*
2. *What options do you think are available in this situation?*
3. *Which ones would you discard? Which ones would you consider most strongly?*
4. *What course(s) of action do you recommend the president take? Why?*

## Ethics attitudes

You wouldn't want to make a decision about college or about whom to marry in the same carefree way you decided as a third-grader what brand of gum to chew. Complex, life-altering decisions require adult consideration. Likewise, making moral decisions now and as an adult requires a more mature ethical attitude than you had as a young child.

We all grow in moral sensitivity as we develop our sense of what is right and wrong. This growth differs with the individual, but most of us have similar early stages of moral growth. Unfortunately, though, what should be merely a transitional childhood phase of moral growth becomes for too many their permanent lifelong ethical attitude. So let's examine some of these "ethics attitudes" of childhood before we discuss the ones that should belong to adults.

### Will / get caught—or rewarded?

When you were a small child, two of your first words were probably *yes* and *no*. You learned that *yes* meant something was okay to do—that, if you did it, you'd get hugged, kissed, patted on the head, smiled at, given a cookie, or otherwise rewarded. At least you learned you wouldn't get punished for it. You also learned that doing a "no-no" resulted in being uncomfortable—someone would be mad at you, you'd be talked to sternly and maybe punished. So, at that time, you saw good and bad in terms of earning rewards and avoiding punishments—and it was on that basis that you made your decisions.

Young children make decisions in response to reasons someone else dictates. It's not surprising that children's first moral decisions are made the same way. For example, out of fear of being caught and scolded, disappointing his or her parents, and being grounded, a child may choose to **do** the homework assignment instead of copying it from a friend.

Unfortunately, many teenagers and adults choose to avoid developing a more adult approach and continue operating with a childish moral attitude: Cheating is okay as long as I don't get caught, get an F for it, or have my folks called. It's okay not to report that I've accidentally hit someone's parked car if no one saw me and I can get away clean. It doesn't so much matter to these persons who else gets hurt or how unfair it is to others, as long as **they** themselves don't get hurt.

### What's in it for me?

Like other children, as you grew a little older, your decisions probably became more self-centered—based more on what satisfied your internal personal needs than on external rewards or punishments—rather than parent or teacher centered. At that point, right was what made you feel good, gave *you* self-satisfaction or pleasure. Wrong was what made you feel bad, gave you pain, or caused *you* to be dissatisfied. You may have been nice to others mainly so that they'd be nice to you.

Regrettably, many individuals retain this self-centered attitude as teenagers and throughout adulthood: It's okay to break someone's heart, as long as mine isn't broken. Such persons operate by a strange Golden Rule: Do to others as you wish, but don't let others do as they wish to you.

### transitional

passing from one thing or phase to another

### Journal entry

What kinds of decisions do you still tend to base on reward and punishment?

### Discuss

1. When you were a very small child, why did you do what you were told was right? Why did you avoid doing what you were told was wrong?
2. What would happen if everybody based their moral decisions on only what they'd be rewarded or punished for? Would you want such persons as your friends?

### Journal entry

What kinds of decisions do you still tend to base on "What's in it for me?"

### Discuss

To what extent do you think teenagers and adults base moral decisions on "What's in it for me?" Explain and give examples.

### What does the law tell me to do?

Those who have the “it’s the law” approach to morality—one of the faulty approaches discussed in the last chapter—often adopt a personal “law and order” attitude in which obedience is all-important. If a rule or law says a certain action is right, that action is deemed **morally right**; if there’s **no** rule or law against a certain action, that action is considered **not morally wrong**. The rules or laws accepted blindly and unquestioningly as the moral norms may be those, for instance, of one’s family, friends, employer, society, or religion. (But blind and unquestioning obedience is not the same as free, intelligent obedience to **legitimate** teaching or authority.)

#### norms

standards or principles of right action

#### legitimate

established according to the proper principles, standards, or procedures

Teenagers and adults who operate from a “What’s my absolute duty?” basis of morality rely on authority figures (parents, teachers, employers, gang leaders, and so forth—some legitimate and others not) to hand them the moral solutions. These individuals have trouble making wise moral decisions on their own. They easily go astray in moral matters when those in authority fail to provide the proper moral direction.

Thus, a teenager whose dad has racist attitudes might consider it wrong to make friends with kids of another race. A teenage boy might think it all right to use an illegal drug because his parents do, or a teenage girl might think it okay to smoke or drink alcohol as long as her mom doesn’t strongly and clearly object.

The problem here isn’t in obeying the proper rules and laws of legitimate authority—which is a morally good thing for everyone to do. The danger lies in **blindly** letting rules and laws—or the lack of them—automatically steer one’s moral behavior. Rather, we must use our conscience to assess the moral legitimacy and correctness of the rules and laws we follow. And, where there are no applicable rules or laws, we must carefully consider what is right and what is not right.

Ironically, members who give unquestioning allegiance to anti-government militia groups are just as stuck in this underdeveloped moral mentality as those who blindly follow their friends’ or boss’s or government’s orders. Both are absolutely convinced they’re acting quite independently. In fact, they are being easily led and manipulated. Thus the insecure “rebel” may seek independence from strict rules at home, yet unquestioningly obey the even stricter ones of a street gang. And a young person from a family which lacks a moral structure may follow the gang blindly in the search for a sense of structure.

“Law and order” mentality individuals may not be making moral decisions for purely self-centered reasons, but they still haven’t achieved internal independence. They haven’t learned to use their heads wisely, nor to assume personal responsibility in making their own moral decisions. When such persons unquestioningly follow good rules, laws, and leaders, there is a degree of order and stability in the family, at school, and in society. But when they blindly follow the charismatic lead of a Hitler, horrors like the **Holocaust** result. The law-and-order mentality is common, but is not the ideal on which to base one’s moral decisions—at least not according to Jesus, as we will see later.

#### Holocaust

the Nazis’ killing of over six million Jews before and during World War II in a systematic attempt to exterminate all Jews



## For discussion

1. What would happen if everyone in the world made moral decisions based solely on pleasing others? Why?
2. To what extent do you think teenagers and adults make moral decisions based on duty and law? Why?
3. Some researchers think most adults make moral decisions based above all on pleasing others or on following orders. Do you agree? Do you think this is true of most adults or teenagers? Explain and give examples to support your opinion.

## What will get others to like or accept me?

For those with this moral attitude, right or wrong depends on what pleases or displeases others. If somebody else approves of a decision or action, then it must be right. If they disapprove, that makes it wrong. Because the person's sense of self-worth isn't solid enough, being liked or accepted by others is all-important. Peer pressure rules.

In late childhood and the early teen years, relying on peer pressure becomes especially pronounced. (Does "everyone else does it" sound vaguely familiar to you?) Teenagers often want to go along with the crowd in order to win peer approval. Indeed, we are all in some way affected by others' opinions of us and of our actions.

Sadly, however, many individuals never reach a healthy adult autonomy. Instead of basing decisions on merit and taking an independent stand, they base decisions on gaining others' approval. So the politician votes according to what will boost him in the opinion polls. The teenager acts according to what will make him or her popular. The mother who thinks her constantly crying infant or disobedient toddler doesn't love her may respond abusively.

Doing things to please others isn't always bad. In fact, a sincere reading of the gospel message tells us it can be the right motive for our actions if done as a free act of love. But when one person lives to please another, perhaps out of fear, surrendering her or his own identity in the process, that aim-to-please-at-all-costs attitude is extremely damaging. A sense of right and wrong is replaced by a need to be accepted.

## Journal entry

In what situations are you most inclined to just do as you're told without thinking about it—when you probably should think about it first?

## autonomy

state of being independent and self-reliant

## Journal entry

1. In your school experience, how did peer pressure begin shaping the way you made decisions?
2. Being honest with yourself, consider to what extent peer pressure affects your thinking and decisions now. Explain.
3. In what types of situations do you most tend to make moral decisions based on pleasing others?

## Discuss

1. How strongly do you think teenagers are influenced by peer pressure? Why?
2. Give other examples in our society of how people make moral decisions based on what will win others' approval.
3. To what extent do you think teenagers make decisions—especially moral decisions—based on what will win others' approval?

**Journal entry**

1. Do you ever make decisions based on what is good for society? Explain.
2. In what situations do you tend most to make moral decisions based on the principles involved? Give examples.

*Great truths  
are felt before they  
are expressed.*

**PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN**

**What are society's standards?**

This moral-decision-making attitude goes beyond law and order and beyond seeking others' approval to the generally agreed-upon norms and rights behind the laws. In this approach, right is what society guarantees and upholds—what everybody agrees to as standards of common conduct. This approach favors obeying laws that support these standards. Laws deemed “unconstitutional” and laws that clearly violate society's standards are viewed as wrong. Laws are no longer seen as norms in themselves; they can be changed for the greater common purpose.

Some ethics researchers contend that most adults never get beyond themselves or beyond laws to reach a moral attitude of genuine concern for society's overall welfare. For example: Do teenagers obey school rules out of respect for others' rights, or because they're afraid they'll get caught and punished if they break the rules, or because “rules are to be obeyed,” or in order to please rather than upset their parents and school officials?

**It's the principle of the thing**

A higher level of moral attitude is based on universal ethical principles. Principles are not as concrete as rules and laws, yet good laws and rules are based on worthy principles. Principles are ideal values that are good in themselves. Individuals are morally right who follow their conscience by trying to determine how best to apply the principles in which they believe. Going against one's principles and one's conscience is wrong.

These universal ethical principles go beyond what is merely good for oneself or even for society. They deal with how all others would like to be treated as, for example, in the Golden Rule. They deal with the equality that everyone would like to have, with the dignity and the rights that every person should have—regardless of his or her society or status in it.

Principled individuals with this ethical attitude can set aside self-interests for the sake of the rights and the greater good of others. This moral attitude is similar to what Jesus taught his followers—we're all obliged to do what we can to bring about the greatest good for others. The truly moral person believes every individual has a unique dignity and certain rights that should never be violated. All persons are loved by God and are therefore worthy of everyone else's concern.

**For discussion**

1. *How does basing moral decisions on society's standards go beyond basing them purely on self-interests?*
2. *Why does that ethics attitude not go far enough—what possible problems might basing moral decisions solely on this attitude lead to?*
3. *What are principles? What is meant by universal ethical principles?*
4. *Why are universal ethical principles important, and how should individuals use them in making moral decisions? Why should a Christian take this approach?*

## She's mine

Studies show that about one out of every three high school and college students has experienced some type of violence—sexual, physical, verbal, or emotional—in their dating relationships. Read the following situation and respond to the questions.

*Jeremy tells Amy often that he loves her. He gets pretty mad at her if she talks to other guys at school, but then he's just as sweet and loving as before. He tells her she's "his" woman. That Jeremy feels so strongly about her—that he seems to care so much about her—makes Amy feel loved, wanted, and important.*

*Jeremy even takes an interest in how Amy dresses, telling her what to wear to please him (which, of course, she does). When they go out, it's usually Jeremy who decides what they will do for the evening. Amy likes the manly way Jeremy takes charge.*

*Inside, Amy doesn't know what she'd do without Jeremy. Amy also thinks she's good for Jeremy. She knows he has a hot temper—he'll sometimes yell names at or threaten others with violence. While this sometimes makes Amy uneasy, she knows that she's a good influence on Jeremy because he's almost always loving and charming when he's with her.*

### For discussion

1. Based on what you know, would you classify Amy and Jeremy's relationship as mostly healthy or unhealthy? Why?
2. Violence can take many forms, from verbal violence to emotional violence to physical violence. How would you define "dating violence"? Do you see any signs of it in Jeremy and Amy's relationship? Explain.
3. Young men and women often misinterpret possessiveness, jealousy, control exploitation, and even physical abuse as signs of love—instead of as signs of abuse. Why do you think this is? Do you see any signs of this happening in Amy and Jeremy's relationship?
4. How does society show that it values control and power? How do you think this rubs off on what individuals think is proper behavior in a relationship?
5. What negative ideas about male-female roles do you think encourage unhealthy or even violent attitudes between the sexes?
6. Which of the ethics attitudes discussed previously do you think Jeremy has? Which do you think Amy has? Why do you think Jeremy and Amy do not seem to exhibit the other moral attitudes? Explain.

## Social influences on conscience

How often do you adjust your plans because of the weather? Does a dreary day outside affect your mood and attitude? Our physical environment does affect us, and can make us feel comfortable, uneasy, or miserable. The people and the ideas that surround us affect us even more.

People used to routinely live with their doors unlocked. No more. Instead, security and self-defense devices have become multi-million dollar businesses. But why? What's gone haywire? Why is there so much child abuse and other violence in our society (where 60 percent of rape victims are teenagers)? Why must some schools use metal detectors and hire armed guards to protect their students? Why are you afraid to go alone to certain places or to not padlock your locker or alarm your car?

Religious beliefs and moral upbringing certainly have an ongoing influence on our conscience. But other factors influence it as well—and not always in the best ways. Especially key are the ideas of our society and culture, and the example and opinions of people around us. When these ideas, opinions, and examples correspond to what is truly right and good, they sharpen our conscience and strengthen our will to follow it. When they promote what is wrong, they can weaken our moral sensitivity and resolve.

### Journal entry

1. List the social influences you think influence you most in positive ways.
2. List those you think affect you most in negative ways.

*I am a part of all  
that I have met. . . .*

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON,  
ULYSSES.

### desensitized

made less sensitive or responsive  
to, or less aware of

*How much we are the  
woods we wander in.*

FROM "CEREMONY" BY  
RICHARD WILBUR.

## Desensitizing conscience

Any surgeon whose career started with cutting up a human cadaver in medical school can tell you: At first it makes you cringe or get sick to your stomach. But the more you get used to it, the less it bothers you, until eventually it's no big deal. Common sense, human experience, and research all tell us that this is also true of moral matters—but in a harmful rather than beneficial way.

Individuals constantly exposed to immoral influences eventually, and to varying degrees, become morally **desensitized**. What their conscience once clearly perceived to be good or bad gradually becomes morally confusing, until they just don't feel that what's wrong is so wrong, or what's right is so right anymore. If this seems like "no big deal" to you, consider how you might feel if you were raped, mugged, robbed, or otherwise ripped off. Or think about the last time you were lied to, gossiped about, offended by somebody's rude attitude, or deliberately hurt by someone who didn't seem to give a darn how their behavior affected you.

Police can catch and jails can hold only so many criminals—and that is only after the harm has been done. We must all help create a moral climate that will encourage everyone to want to do right and avoid wrong—and for the best reasons. We will be strong enough to do that, though, only if we protect and develop our own conscience.

### Project

- Write a "weather report" of your school's moral "climate" that includes the following:
  - Sunny areas (ways in which kindness, respect, and other positive qualities and responses are encouraged)
  - Cloudy areas (ways in which negative attitudes and behavior are encouraged)
  - Stormy areas (the types of attitudes and behavior at your school that most trouble you)
  - Specific ways you can improve the "forecast" by helping to improve your school's moral climate
- Share your weather report with the class. Work together to develop a project that will make a positive difference in your school's moral climate.

## For discussion

- What do you think has gone haywire in our society, morally speaking? Why do you think this has occurred?
- What social influences do you think exert the strongest influences on teenagers' consciences?
- How would you describe a desensitized conscience? Give examples of the kind of behavior to which this leads.
- What social influences do you think play a major role in helping to desensitize people's consciences? Explain.
- Why is it important that we create a moral climate? What do you think this moral climate should include? Should not include?

## The mass media

Among the most powerful secular influences on morality are the various mass media—television and movies, music (lyrics), electronic games, newspapers and magazines, and the Internet with its wide variety of options and opinions. Consider, then, what Catholic teaching has to say about the power and potential of the mass media, and sensible guidelines for the use of the media.

### Catholic teaching on instruments of social communication<sup>2</sup>

The mass media can be instruments that bring us closer to God.

If used properly, they can refresh and enlighten us, help nourish our human spirit, and uplift humanity. If abused, these instruments can harm society.

Everyone who uses them must apply the correct moral standards in doing so, keeping in mind both the *subject matter* and the *circumstances* that may affect the moral quality of what is being communicated:

- What is the message and what audience will it reach?
- Why is this message being communicated, and why is it being communicated in this way?
- Where, when, and how is the communication to occur?

We all like to believe we're independent thinkers, but (as researchers have often confirmed) the truth is that we are all influenced in some way by what we encounter often. The kinds of foods we put into our bodies all the time eventually can clog our arteries and kill us, or can keep us strong and healthy. The same is true of what we put into our minds. The key is to be aware enough, wise enough, and in control enough that we let ourselves be influenced only for good.

Since the various media so powerfully influence individuals, societies, and the world, it's critical that we examine carefully how we allow or should allow them to affect our own moral integrity and the social moral standards that surround and influence all of us.

### Activity

List five of your favorite TV shows, songs, video games, recreational Internet sites, and/or magazines. The next time you access these media, record your evaluations by answering these questions:

1. What is the surface message? What are the underlying messages? Who are these aimed at?
2. What would the people I admire most do in the situation, or how would they respond to what is being portrayed here?
3. Is my exposure to this making me a better person in some way? Explain briefly.
4. Is there anything that bothers me—or that probably should bother me here? Explain briefly.
5. How is this medium trying to influence me? What is it trying to get me to do?

Share your findings with the class.

### mass media

means of communicating regularly with large segments of society, as by television or the Internet

*Pertinent, too, is the characteristic way in which a given instrument achieves its effect. Its power may be so compelling that people, especially if they are caught off guard, may scarcely be able to appreciate it, to moderate it, or, when necessary, to reject it.*

**"DECREE ON THE INSTRUMENTS OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION,"  
NUMBER 4.**

### integrity

soundness of moral principles; honesty and sincerity

We often rationalize that frequent exposure to negative moral values in media “won’t hurt me because I’m strong enough to handle it.” This is false. In reality, a steady diet of those things that manipulate people, distort truth, and assault moral sensibilities will harm us morally. Thus, it is important to use our power of critical thinking to assess how various media are attempting to manipulate us. We must choose what will reinforce our moral values and actively guard against desensitization of our conscience.

### Project

Following your instructor’s directions, use the worksheet you are given to record specific instances of how the media you encounter

- reinforce your moral values
- offend your moral sensibilities
- enlighten or uplift your spirit
- attempt to manipulate you
- communicate the truth responsibly, intelligently, fairly
- distort the truth or don’t fairly present both sides of a situation or issue

### Journal entry

1. List five ways you influence the moral climate around you.
2. List one way you would like to do this more positively.

*What youth needs  
is a sense of  
significant being,  
a sense of reverence  
for the society to  
which we all  
belong.*

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

It is also important to understand the many ways you influence the moral climate around you. People often are unaware of how much their opinions and actions affect others. It used to be that the media’s influence was mainly a one-way street: The media spoke and people merely listened. Yes, you could write a letter to a network, a sponsor, a movie studio, and so on. But it wasn’t as convenient to do as it now is with electronic mail, and your single opinion couldn’t have had as wide an audience as it can have now in the Internet era.

Now you can post a message that is read by thousands of people around the globe. Ordinary people are finally able to have a say—and be listened to. Sometimes their contributions are refreshing and profound. At other times, what they say (or how) isn’t intelligent or responsible. Sometimes it’s rude, trashy, unreasonable, and wrong.

As you participate in the international Internet dialogue, keep in mind the impact you can have. Realize the power you have when you buy—or buy into—the various media. When the adults in one community protested that a cigarette manufacturer’s billboard was encouraging young children to begin smoking, they were ignored. But when the children from a local school voiced their opposition to it, the billboard ad was taken down immediately.

Though you may feel that your opinions matter little in an adult world, don’t underestimate the impact only you can have, and right now, precisely because of your youth. Make your clout count. Use it to better humanity, rather than to drag the human spirit down. As you do so, consider these suggestions for maintaining your moral integrity and for helping to raise social moral standards as well—

- Be aware of the moral qualities of the media available to you—especially those you use or encounter most.
- Use media that are good—that uplift the human spirit.
- Reject media that are dishonest, degrading, or dangerous—and communicate to others why you disapprove.

- Realize how powerfully your choices do affect what becomes popular and available for everyone.
- Take time periodically to think seriously and honestly about how the various media you use affect your attitudes, how you think and act, and how you respond to others: Is a given medium helping you become the kind of person you should be and really would like to be?
- Ask yourself: Given what he taught us, what would Jesus think of my exposure to this type of media?

### For discussion

1. *How much influence do you think mass media have on people's moral standards?*
2. *Which particular type(s) of media in our society do you think most influence the moral standards of children? Of teenagers? Of adults?*
3. *Describe in your words the Catholic Church's general guidelines regarding mass media. Explain how you think these guidelines should be applied to these media:*
  - television programs
  - the things others place on Internet websites
  - video and computer games
  - the way you use or would like to use the Internet
4. *Explain the Catholic Church's statement about the way a mass media instrument achieves its effect. What specific media would you place in this category? (Give examples of those you've encountered personally and state your reaction to them.)*
5. *In what ways do you think people need to more critically assess how the media may be manipulating them? In what way do you think you need to do this more?*
6. *In what ways do you and other teenagers uniquely influence society and public opinion? Give examples of both the positive and negative ways teenagers do this.*

### Advertising ethics

By the time children begin first grade, media researchers estimate that they have seen about 250,000 advertisements. By the time young people reach 18 years of age, they have seen at least 100,000 beer commercials. None of us can see and hear that much of anything without somehow being influenced by it! Indeed, ads so effectively get people to believe they can achieve status and popularity by owning the product that some children and teenagers have robbed and murdered just to get a highly advertised pair of shoes or starter jacket or another article of clothing.

Advertising can be a wonderful tool, linking businesses and manufacturers with consumers who truly can benefit from the products. Hardly any business could be successful without advertising. What needs critical examining, however, are the not-so-ethical means used in advertising, and the ways and reasons we let ads manipulate us.

The preaching about morals that we're exposed to most often today doesn't come from the pulpit, the Bible, or a religion book. It blares and glares at us in the ads we hear and see, ads where moral judgment is too frequently twisted or suspended for the sake of sales. The true manipulation is not of our wallets, but of our moral sense. As the billions of advertising dollars confirm, if these strategies to redirect one's moral sense didn't work, if they didn't influence people so much, advertisers wouldn't use them. The question is: Why are we buying it? The following exercise will give you a chance to assess this for yourself.

### Discuss

1. **What dishonest, degrading, or dangerous media have you encountered? Explain why you consider them such.**
2. **Give examples of five specific media presentations you think Jesus would wholeheartedly approve of and five you think he would disapprove of. For each example, explain why.**

## Do you buy it?

Read about the various advertising tactics, and then respond to the questions.

### *What seems too good to be true—is*

*One of the oldest unethical advertising scams is the now-unlawful “bait and switch” trick: You see a too-good-to-be-true deal advertised on a used car. When you go immediately to the dealer, you’re told the car (which never did exist) has “just been sold,” or that it’s “really a piece of junk.” Then you’re shown “a much better deal for you over here” (at a higher price, of course).*

### *Deception*

*The ad says “More hospitals use Product X than any other pain reliever.” What the ad doesn’t tell consumers is the real reason more hospitals use this product—the pharmaceutical manufacturer steeply discounts the product for hospitals so that more of them will buy that brand than any other brand and the manufacturer then can advertise that as fact. For consumers, however, other pain reliever brands may be equally or more effective—and much cheaper.*

### *Faulty logic and forced choices*

*The ads ask you to leap to the false conclusion that because “Doctors prescribe the medicines in Brand Y more than all others” (which may be true), doctors therefore prescribe Brand Y itself more than the others (which may be false). The “medicines” Brand Y contains might be something, for example, like aspirin. The truth is, it’s the ingredients available in many pain reliever brands, and not Brand Y alone, that doctors prescribe most often. Yet the ad implies that if you want the most medically approved product, this is your only choice.*

**COLLEGE GRADS:**

**A GRADUATION PRESENT FOR YOU!**

THE COLLEGE GRADUATE PURCHASE PROGRAM OFFERS YOU...

- ★ **A \$400 REBATE**  
When you buy or lease an eligible new vehicle
- ★ **SPECIAL FINANCING**  
With pre-approved credit levels through Ford Credit

ASK SALESPERSON FOR FULL DETAILS

LIMITED TIME OFFER  
MARCH 1 - DECEMBER 31



### **Beware the fine print**

A common advertising tactic is to put appealing information in bold print and restrictions and exclusions in fine print. As one lawyer puts it, "The insurance agent who sells you the policy sells you the bold print, and the adjuster you meet when you wreck your car and have a claim sells you the fine print: 'The bold print giveth, and the fine print taketh away.'"

### **Selling morals cheap**

More importantly, in addition to inducing us to buy products, many ads "sell" moral attitudes by cleverly and deliberately appealing to and then trying to manipulate our sense of right and wrong. Thus, individuals buy what is actively promoted as good for everyone without considering whether it's right or wrong for them: An avalanche of credit card ads hooks college students into spending irresponsibly and graduating neck-deep in debt. Beer commercials make drinking appear to be a proof of manliness. In the recent past, fashion magazines had models adopt a "heroin addict" look—until storms of public criticism caused them to revoke the ad campaign.

### **The sexual sell**

Advertisers generally agree among themselves that "sex sells." Ads encouraging various kinds of sexual attitudes and expressions are widely used to promote products, as in alluring jeans or cologne ads that seem to encourage promiscuous behavior. Consumers are gradually led to believe (perhaps subconsciously) that sexually expressing oneself openly is good—without reference

to personal dignity and self-respect, religious values, a loving relationship, or a permanent commitment. Ads that show seductive models tied up in a way that suggests rape or sexual bondage invite men to believe (absurdly) that women desire to be sexually abused. Presented as acceptable in a commercial is a woman jokingly using an offhand sexist remark toward a man. Thus, in addition to the manufacturers' products, ads promote sexual attitudes and expressions—whether or not the values presented are moral.

### **For discussion**

1. How much and in what ways do you think advertising influences teenagers? How do the ads you see and hear influence you?
2. Three of the most common themes used in advertising are sex, death, and religion. Why do you think this is so? From ads you've seen or heard, give examples of how each of these themes is used to sell a product.
3. Have you ever been the victim of a "bait and switch" ploy or a "too-good-to-be-true" bargain that wasn't a bargain? Have you ever had "fine-print regrets"? Have you ever believed an ad, bought a product, and later regretted your purchase? Explain.
4. What kinds of ads hook you the most? (Be honest.) Why? Are these ads selling something besides the products?
5. What ads have you seen or heard that feature a wholesome, positive attitude toward sexuality? That use sex in a degrading or other negative way, or that encourage undesirable attitudes or behavior? Explain.
6. To what extent do you think advertising helps shape social moral values? Explain.
7. Why do you think people buy into the values—or the lack of proper values—that advertisers promote along with the products? When you see or hear an ad, do you think about the message it is communicating about moral values? Explain.

### **Project**

1. Write a description of, or bring to class, two examples of ads that use each of these techniques
  - deception, faulty logic, and/or forced choices to induce consumers to buy a product
  - attitudes about sex, religion, or death (or riskily defying it) to sell a product
2. Critically evaluate each ad's moral content, explaining what moral attitude(s) or behavior(s) it appeals to and/or encourages and whether you think the attitudes and behaviors are morally good or not.

**culture**

the ideas, customs, and so on, that a group passes along to subsequent generations

**human moral consciousness**

people's awareness of what is right and wrong

*Every person is the creature of the age in which he or she lives; very few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the times.*

VOLTAIRE

**anthropologists**

scientists who study human characteristics and practices from humanity's origins to the present

**Discuss**

1. Do you agree with Voltaire's statement? Do you think it's true today?
2. Which persons do you think have elevated humanity's moral consciousness the most in recent times?

**Culture and conscience**

"Why isn't something that is considered all right in another culture," students often ask, "also considered right here? For example, some cultures don't frown on having sex outside of marriage, so why does ours? If no clothes are required at public beaches in some cultures, then why is ours so uptight about what people wear—or don't wear?" It's interesting, however, that, if other cultures have allowed head-hunting, cannibalism, and the stoning of those who engage in premarital sex, nobody usually asks why we don't!

Human moral consciousness has been developing over thousands of years. We might compare it to the individual's growth in moral consciousness from infancy to adulthood. In the first years of life, the child is concerned with basic physical needs—being fed, having diapers changed, and being physically comfortable. These physical needs are primary in infants' and toddlers' awareness. If they could express themselves in words and moral concepts, infants would say that right is having these needs met and wrong is not having them met—and they would be correct. In fact, it is wrong to neglect anyone's need for food, clothing, shelter, and basic physical comfort.

As the young child grows a bit older, he or she also grows aware of other needs—to be praised, accepted, and loved, for example. Right or wrong begins now to include how the child's own emotional needs are met. With age and experience, the child grows in sensitivity toward others, and begins to realize that unnecessarily hurting others is bad and helping others is good.

So it is with humanity as a whole. Early humans were concerned mainly with meeting basic physical needs. A simple criteria arose—it was right to provide food for one's clan and wrong to have it stolen by others. As human consciousness grew more sensitive to personal growth and relationships, humanity began to consider things like human rights in a moral context. This is, however, a relatively recent development in human history—and one not yet fully realized in our own society!

Even today, not all groups and cultures are at the same stage of moral awareness and sensitivity regarding human dignity, equality, and rights. Thus cultures have differing ideas of right and wrong. Lest we smugly consider ourselves advanced, a glance at the daily news (and some of our own less-than-noble tendencies) should tell us that we have quite a way to go. In fact, anthropologists tell us we actually are behind some "less civilized" cultures in certain areas of moral behavior. For instance, some "underdeveloped" cultures show greater respect and support for the elderly than does our youth- and productivity-oriented society.

The growth process involved in becoming morally sensitive can be difficult because we sometimes learn the hard way. But with an increased understanding of the wrongs to be avoided comes an increased awareness of what constitutes happiness and human fulfillment. For example, until recent times, women were considered the property of their fathers and then of their husbands. That lack of moral understanding kept many people from experiencing the fulfilling joys of loving family and spousal relationships. Once they have experienced freedom and meaningful relationships, some college students studying away from their home country refuse to return home for an arranged marriage.



An action that is meaningful in one culture can be meaningless in another culture. Harmless words and gestures in one society may be offensive in another. For example, if a friend bowed to you when coming into your home, you might think it strange. But, in some instances in Japan, to omit such a greeting is rude.

Most cultural differences are merely social, but some do involve views of what is or isn't morally acceptable behavior. While the fundamental moral norms underlying the Ten Commandments are generally shared throughout the world, other rules and guidelines can and do differ from one culture to another. Two examples: In some African cultures, having more than one wife is considered acceptable. Singapore punishes the recreational use of illegal drugs with death!

One of morality's main roles is to help society evaluate its flaws and limits in moral consciousness and continually reach beyond these. Morality, then, must help society criticize itself and better itself. It is by helping humanity become more fully human, as Jesus taught, that God's desire for all of us ultimately will be realized. Your role is to participate in this task intelligently and responsibly. Hopefully, what you are studying during this course will help you do that more courageously and wisely.

### For discussion

1. *Why do certain cultures evaluate the rightness or wrongness of some actions differently?*
2. *Explain the development of human moral consciousness. How is this reflected in individuals' and cultures' differing moral perceptions?*
3. *What other factors influence why different cultures evaluate some actions differently?*
4. *What benefits does increased moral consciousness bring for individuals and societies?*
5. *Would you like to see morality play a more important role in our society's moral consciousness? Explain.*

### Activity

Read one of the passages from Israel's prophets in which the prophet criticizes the society of his time. Then respond to these questions:

1. *What was being criticized as wrong and/or held up as a better way here?*
2. *Whom do you think this prophet's message is addressing today?*

## Portraying “reality”

Read the following and respond to the questions.

*Societies worldwide are concerned about the desensitizing effects the amount of gratuitous violence and sex portrayed in the media have on crime and unwanted pregnancy rates. People’s attitudes and behavior are affected by what they see constantly. Exposure to too much violence and sexual promiscuity dulls moral perceptions of these problems, helping them appear attractive or at least acceptable, rather than wrong.*

*So it then seems okay to slap one’s girlfriend around, punch one’s boyfriend, or sleep around—because that’s the way the daytime dramas portray “reality.” There seems to be no risk in sex outside of a faithful marriage relationship. People get punched and kicked brutally and repeatedly—and then, unfazed, bounce back for more, when the real reality is that one blow or fall often maims or kills.*

*Those who are psychologically vulnerable and/or morally weak (and a great many people are) tend to transfer the misguided lessons they learn about morality from the media to their own lives. That, in turn, results in ruined futures, messed-up relationships, and even murder. (Whether justifiable or not, lawyers now claim “The media made me do it” as a defense for certain crimes.)*

*In recent surveys, most teenagers said they think there is too much violence on television. While some say the violence bothers them, others say it’s only entertaining. Interestingly, most think there should be some kind of advisories*

*notifying parents that a show has violent content. Teenagers add that they think toy and video-game manufacturers, along with movie and TV producers, are the least likely to want to remove violence.*

*Producers themselves have various views about the violence in the media. One said: “Make no mistake about it. Film companies are out to make money. And if it takes something gory, horrific, or shocking to make money, they don’t care about morality.” One of Hollywood’s most famous movie directors thinks that merely suggesting violence is more effective than showing it close up. He says he prefers to suggest it, and then focus on someone’s reaction to it. A young boy, however, responds, “It’s not as interesting as when somebody gets shot and there’s blood all over the place.”*

*And there certainly is blood all over the place. Researchers find that the average child in our society watches thousands of murders and over 100,000 violent acts on television. About half of the television episodes that contain violence show no real harm or pain. In most instances, the violence appears to go unpunished, while in relatively few cases are long-term—or, in fact, any—negative consequences portrayed. One pay TV channel has even begun featuring “ultimate fighting” where two men fight no-holds-barred inside a cage. Although this program has been banned in many places, satellite transmissions make it possible for viewers to watch it anyway.*

## For discussion

1. Explain what is meant by media portrayals of violence and sex that are gratuitous. That are justifiable.
2. What is the difference between (1) violence and sexual promiscuity in reality and (2) how you’ve seen them portrayed on television?
3. How much influence do you think media portrayals of violence and sexuality have on people’s consciences and behavior in our society? On teenagers’ attitudes and behavior? Give examples.
4. Do you think there’s too much violence and sex portrayed in the media? Give examples to support your opinion.
5. The chairwoman of a TV network popular with teenagers has said that network executives have the attitude that “you program only to boys because girls will watch anything.” How do you react to her comment? Why?
6. What TV shows have you seen that portrayed violence or sexuality non-gratuitously and responsibly? That have contained violence without consequences or sex without responsibility?
7. How would the Catholic guidelines for sensibly using the media apply to this issue?

### gratuitous

unnecessary, not called for, not justified

## Using your head to make right decisions

[Jesus asked,] “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?”

— LUKE 12:57

Jesus taught us the importance of being responsible for our decisions. For Christians, this means that the role of conscience in moral decision making isn't a matter of intuition, hunches, or listening to little voices. While feelings are important to being human and should be considered, by themselves they are not an accurate guide in making moral decisions. Nor is the majority always right—what “everybody else” says or does is not always good.

The Catholic understanding of conscience is much more realistic: **Using our conscience means using our head**—using our ability to reason. It means considering the alternatives in light of the correct values and priorities—especially those Jesus taught, so that we are able to assess moral matters the way God judges them. Finally, it involves trying to do the most loving and least harmful thing in the situation.

### Making conscientious judgments

No one else can or should make your moral decisions for you. You must make them freely according to **your own** conscience. But we must not use our freedom of conscience as an excuse or cover-up for just doing whatever we please. We're not free just to do our own thing. Our conscience must be well-informed. We must try to find out what is the best thing.

This means that you must reason to make what you think is the best judgment—**only after you have done all you can to determine carefully what is objectively the best decision in the situation.**

You wouldn't want to be operated on by a surgeon who wasn't well-trained in medicine, or who didn't know enough about your particular case. You wouldn't want to fly on a plane if the pilot didn't know how to operate that particular aircraft. Likewise, making correct moral decisions requires preparation and information.

The more important the matter involved, the more you need to take enough time beforehand to think, study, pray, and consult with others about the decision. For Catholics, this includes considering how we think Jesus would decide here, and understanding and applying the relevant Church teachings. If you make your decisions that way, then you act in good faith whenever you follow your conscience. As Catholic teaching tells us:

- When we act according to our conscience, we are living in good faith.
- We must form our conscience correctly, and then follow it.
- Catholics must base decisions of conscience on prayer, study, consultation, and an understanding of Church teachings.<sup>3</sup>

### Reflection

Do you think you are usually conscientious enough about making moral decisions?

*“Clearly, then, it is necessary to do everything possible to see to it that judgments of conscience are informed and in accord with the moral order of which God is the creator. Common sense requires that conscientious people be open and humble, ready to learn from the experience and insights of others, willing to acknowledge prejudices and even change their judgments in light of better instruction. Above and beyond this, followers of Jesus will have a realistic approach to conscience which leads them to accept what He taught and judge things as He judges them.”*

NATIONAL  
CATECHETICAL  
DIRECTORY,  
NUMBER 103.



### Journal entry

How might you do an even better, more conscientious job of making moral decisions?

**conscientious**

thorough and careful about doing what is right

Catholic teaching tells us that to be a person of conscience, we must be **conscientious**. Rather than being closed-minded, we should learn from the insights and experiences of others. We should be honest enough to admit and change our mind when new information shows us we're on the wrong track. We should be willing to grow as God's Spirit of wisdom and love leads us.

Once we've conscientiously determined what we think is the best decision, we must act accordingly. To do this is to follow our well-informed and caring conscience—not merely a hunch, a feeling, an instinct, what everybody else might think, or some little voice inside. We must follow the truth as we see it, even if others disagree with us.

**For discussion**

1. *How would you describe the Catholic understanding of conscience? Does this understanding of conscience make sense to you? Explain.*
2. *What things does making moral decisions in good faith require of everyone? For Catholics in particular?*
3. *What is the difference between (1) following your well-informed conscience freely and (2) using freedom of conscience as an excuse or cover-up for doing whatever you please?*
4. *What happens when people don't sufficiently inform their conscience before making major moral decisions? Give examples.*
5. *Is it ever wrong for a person to follow his or her conscience? Explain.*
6. *How would you want someone to prepare for making a major moral decision that directly and significantly affects you? Why?*
7. *What do you think it means to make conscientious judgments of conscience?*

**Conscience and religious freedom**

Perhaps the most important of all our freedoms is religious freedom. Recognizing this, people have made extraordinary sacrifices—and continue to do so—just to be able to practice their religious beliefs freely. Some people mistakenly think, however, that belonging to an **organized religion** means your decisions are all determined in advance by religious laws. They misunderstand the nature of religion and the crucial difference between an organized religion and a cult.

Cults employ techniques that require blind, unthinking obedience from their members. They usually require that members cut off or strictly limit their contact with their families and former friends, warning that these people endanger their "salvation." A bland diet, sleep deprivation, extremely routine tasks, and an overwhelming bombardment of "loving" attention by group members adds to the numbing of a recruit's judgment. **Most** religions, on the other hand, recognize and support religious belief as a relationship with God to which one must **assent** freely. It must be admitted, however, that religious freedom has not always been a priority with religions and Churches. The Catholic Church today does urge religious freedom, as do most mainstream Christian Churches.

**organized religion**

a generally recognized Church group

**cult**

broadly, a religious group or sect; more narrowly, an extremist or fanatical religious group that seeks to control members' thoughts and behavior

In 1997, a small group in California came to the attention of the media; it had the usual hallmarks of a cult. Members of Heaven's Gate, who called themselves Christians, believed that it was better not to "trust in your own judgment" or to "use your own mind." Group leaders apparently enforced this prohibition with rules and techniques designed to eliminate members' feelings of autonomy. The cult's teachings, practices, and interpretations of Scripture did not truly support religious freedom. Its core beliefs also contradicted many things Catholics and most other mainstream Christian Churches believe about Jesus and his teachings.

Heaven's Gate members surrendered their freedom so completely to their earthly leader that they blindly and tragically chose to die with him. They remained convinced to the end that they were following the leader's dictates of their own free will. When their leader told them that the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet was a supernatural sign, thirty-nine members of the cult believed him. They packed their bags and then, along with their leader, committed suicide. They anticipated that, as their leader had told them, after "shedding their earthly containers," they would be rescued and taken aboard a UFO.

It is not uncommon for naïve, vulnerable, and lonely people to be targeted by cults. These groups may be led by a sincere but perhaps psychologically unstable leader, or they may be deliberate frauds. Even within recognized religious groups, there may be small cults or cult-like groups. And some members of recognized Churches and religions expect their religious leaders to provide all life's answers for them; they create a cult-like situation for themselves.

Genuine religion, on the other hand, ought to promote and allow for religious freedom—the freedom to believe or to not believe, to follow or to not follow. Anything else violates the dignity God has given us as human beings who are to freely choose our relationship with God and our eternal destiny. You must never give up your sacred responsibility and freedom to decide—especially in religious matters. A genuine religious group will never ask that of you.

## For discussion

1. What is a cult? How does it differ from a religion?
2. What does the Catholic Church teach concerning religious freedom?
3. How did Heaven's Gate approach religious freedom? Why do you think so many of its members went along with the suicide plan?
4. Why do you think cults are considered by most people to be dangerous?
5. Why do you think people become involved with a cult in the first place?

### Discuss

Cults use the Internet, as well as personal contacts, as recruiting tools.

1. Have you ever come across a website or been approached by a person you think might be involved with a cult? How would you know if you had?
2. How do you think you would respond if you did encounter a cult on-line or elsewhere? Explain.

*Foolish persons  
fail to learn from  
their mistakes.  
Smart individuals learn  
from their own mistakes.  
Wise persons learn  
from the mistakes  
of others!*  
OLD SAYING

## Searching for truth

Being less than perfect, our conscience can be mistaken. We can be so strongly pulled toward what is wrong that we try to convince ourselves and others that it's right. Those accustomed to giving in to the pull toward what's wrong are even more likely to be misled in judgment. Our **biases** and prejudices can easily pull us in the wrong direction. We need to confront and correct these biases in ourselves so that we're not swayed or blinded by them. We also must not let other people interfere with our search for truth.

### Catholic guidelines on searching for the truth<sup>4</sup>

We are to freely seek the truth.

- How we do this should respect our dignity and interrelationships as human persons.
- We should use helpful teaching and talk matters over with others.
- We should help each other search for truth by explaining to one another the truth we think we've found.
- It should be by personal consent that we agree to and follow the truth we find.

### For discussion

1. How important do you think searching for the truth is—especially in moral matters? Why?
2. What kinds of things can lead people astray in their search for moral truth? Which of these do you think is most common? Explain and give examples.
3. Why do you think each of the Catholic guidelines for searching for the truth is important? Do these guidelines make sense to you?
4. Which of these guidelines do you usually follow? Which one(s) do you think you should probably follow more often than you do?

*Prayer is an essential part of our search for the truth.*





## What if we make the wrong decision?

What if we make a decision based on our conscience and it turns out that we were mistaken? We are capable of human error. We have the responsibility to search out and understand the truth. **Catholics take seriously** our obligation to be guided in this search by the Church's teaching and by open communication with the Church's teachers. Certainly we all need to pray over our decisions as we make them.

### Catholic teaching on the dignity of conscience<sup>5</sup>

- When we are faithful to our conscience, we join the rest of humanity in searching for the truth and for the best way to solve individual and social problems.
- The more correct our conscience is, the more we will reject choosing ignorantly and the more we will try to follow objective moral norms.
- Our judgments can be mistaken, especially when sin or strong desires keep us from seeing things clearly or lead us in the wrong direction.
- Despite the mistakes people make out of ignorance, conscience keeps its dignity.
- Individuals, however, violate their dignity by not caring about what is true and good, or by doing wrong so constantly that their conscience becomes almost blind.

#### objective moral norms

basic moral standards which exist apart from whether people perceive them or not

Even if we've tried our best to do the right thing, we might be **intellectually** wrong at times. What we **think** is best might not turn out, **objectively** speaking, to be the correct decision or the best one. But **subjectively** we will have made the right moral decision. If we follow our well-informed conscience, we will know that we have done what was for us, at the time and under the circumstances, the right thing to do.

### For discussion

1. What does the Catholic Church believe about the dignity of conscience and how to safeguard it? What does this teaching mean to you personally?
2. Without mentioning names, have you ever met (or been the victim of) someone whose conscience seemed almost blind? Explain.
3. In following your conscience, should you be willing to risk making mistakes? Explain.
4. Is following your conscience always the right thing to do? Can you ever go wrong by following your conscience? Explain.

*Be careful then  
how you live, not as  
unwise people but  
as wise. . . .*

**EPHESIANS 5:15**

### The moral decision-making process

**Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. . . .**

PHILIPPIANS 1:27

Making wise decisions, especially moral ones, is a process and skill that can be learned. As with most complex things, it is not learned all at once, but step by step. Certain important steps in the decision-making process are commonly used in one form or another by persons in government, medicine, law, and other businesses and professions. (In fact, they sometimes pay a lot of money just to be instructed in decision making.) Throughout the rest of this text, you will learn how you can apply these steps to help you make wise moral choices (and better decisions in general).

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

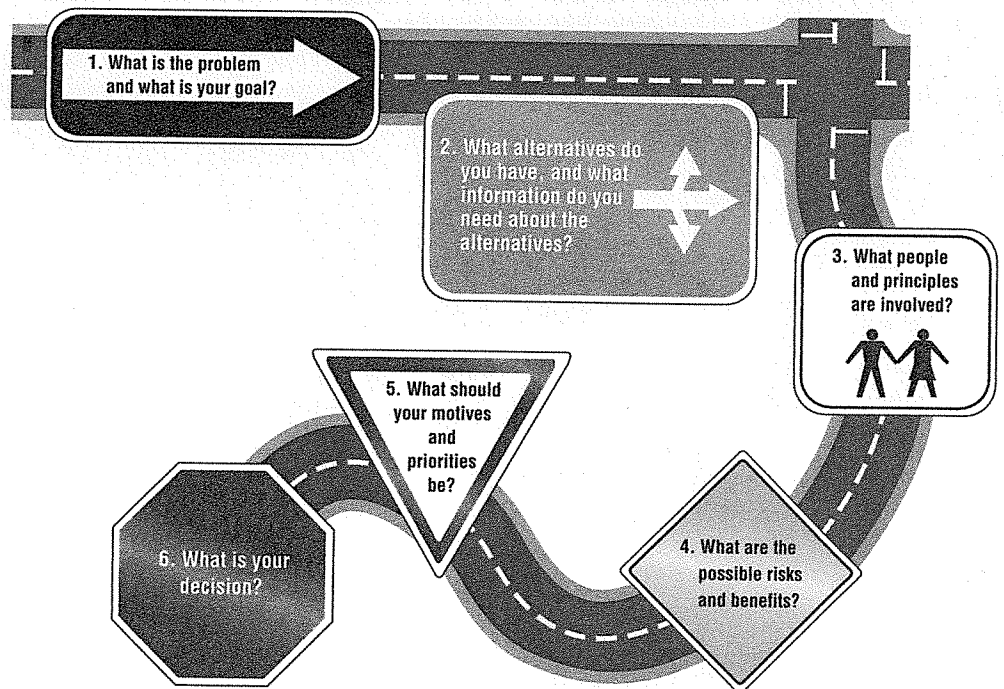
1 John: 4:1

Movement by movement, the best athletes analyze slow-motion replays of themselves practicing. They watch how well or poorly their efforts correspond to the ideals they admire and the goals they've set for themselves. This tells them what skills they need to focus on, reinforce, and improve. They also work diligently on the kinds of mental attitudes and thought processes which can help or hinder them from reaching their goals.

This is the same sort of thing you will be doing with decision making as you discuss the cases from here on in this text. Understand that learning how to solve problems and make decisions wisely is like the athlete's slow-motion analysis of a practice session—a process in which you focus on developing one skill at a time. Thus, each chapter will emphasize one or more of the decision-making steps. As you practice the steps in discussing the moral dilemma cases, resist the temptation to think you're spending too much time analyzing details. Your in-depth analyses will sharpen your conscience to help you make wiser, more correct moral judgments.

Here is an overview of the questions you will focus on in developing your moral decision making skills.

### Steps to moral decision making



### Step 1A: What's the real problem?

The first thing to do when you're faced with a major dilemma—especially a moral one—is to determine exactly what the problem is and what type of decision is called for. Sometimes this will be clearly spelled out; at other times, it won't be so simple.

It's amazing how people can jump to the (usually wrong) conclusion before they even know the problem! What is first thought to be the problem, is often only a symptom of a deeper, more complicated problem. When this happens, a business manager may mistake a temporary fix for a solution, only to be dismayed later that she hasn't solved the problem at all. Likewise, constant arguments about trivial matters can signal deeper problems with a personal relationship. It's no wonder people keep finding themselves right back where they started!

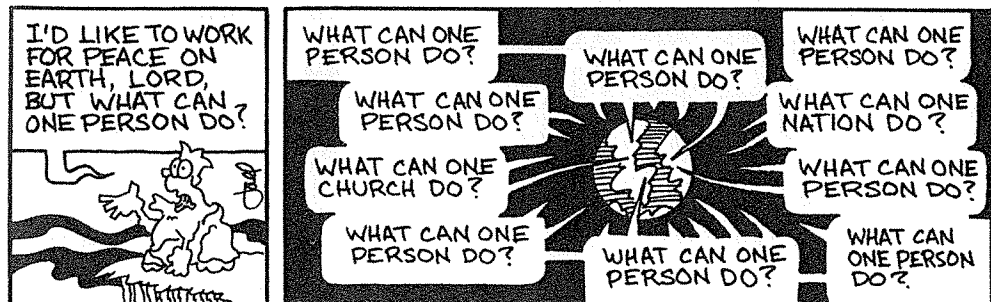
Surface solutions often only cover up major problems, which worsen until they become difficult or impossible to resolve satisfactorily. If a doctor hastily prescribes aspirin for a painful arm, the immediate problem—the pain—might temporarily ease. But if the pain is caused by serious injury or illness, the underlying problem may only get worse.

Whenever you're confronted with a moral or other serious dilemma, stop and think about what the **real** problem is. For instance, it might not be someone's mouth that always gets him or her into trouble. It might be the person's lack of self-discipline and self-control, or lack of self-esteem. Things aren't always what they first appear. But you can't solve a problem successfully if you can't even identify it correctly!

Even in your daily relationship difficulties, think more about what is really going on, rather than just reacting hastily. When your mom seems out of sorts for no reason, instead of just snapping back at her for her bad mood, you might ask her kindly if she's had a hard day at work. In fact, whenever you start to overreact or to quickly react emotionally, step back mentally and consider what's really eating you inside. Then address that issue head on, instead of taking it out on innocent bystanders.

You see, moral issues aren't just the life-threatening kind. Most of us constantly make much smaller moral decisions, decisions that nevertheless affect us and others for good or for ill. If you practice identifying the real problem in these instances, you'll also become much better at making wiser decisions when confronted with the big questions.

### Pondius' Puddle



## Faith healing and religious freedom

Our courts go to great lengths to protect our religious freedom. Thus they may permit certain activities otherwise considered improper or hateful. Sometimes individuals take advantage of this outlandishly, as when prison inmates file lawsuits saying their religion requires them to eat steak and beer dinners! In other cases, the behavior of certain individuals conflicts with civil laws when they sincerely follow their conscience and their religious beliefs. Then the issue of what to allow in the name of religious freedom becomes much stickier. Read the following true account and respond to the questions.

*Sixteen-year-old Shannon, like her parents, believed in faith healing rather than in doctors. So when Shannon started feeling tired and thirsty, her parents didn't take her to the doctor to treat her diabetes. Instead they took their daughter to her grandfather, pastor of a church affiliated with a Christian sect that believes in healing with prayer and faith rather than medicine.*

*Shannon died three days later of a heart attack caused by her untreated diabetic condition. Authorities charged her parents with involuntary manslaughter and child endangerment. During the trial, the prosecutor told jurors how, "Even at the point of coma, this illness was treatable." A police officer testified how Shannon's grandfather, following the advice of the Bible verse, James 5:14-15, had anointed her with oil when she began feeling ill.*



*According to state law, parents must protect their children until the age of eighteen. The prosecutor said Shannon's parents were negligent for not providing her with medical treatment. He pointed out that Shannon had been to a dentist before and had seen a doctor in order to get her driver's license.*

*The parents' attorney, however, said they had tried to help their daughter as best they could without violating their religious beliefs. He said, if she had wanted to, Shannon was old enough to have gotten medical help herself.*

*Several years before, Shannon's eight-year-old brother had died from an ear infection that had gone medically untreated. In that instance, the parents had pled no contest to manslaughter charges and been sentenced to probation and volunteer service at a hospital. The judge had hoped they would learn about the need for and effectiveness of medicine. Unfortunately, no hospital would accept their community service. There are now eight other children in Shannon's family.*

## For discussion

- 1. In deciding whether to prosecute Shannon's parents for her death, what was the district attorney's surface problem? What were the underlying problems? The main problem?*
- 2. For what, if anything, regarding Shannon, do you think the parents should have been prosecuted? Regarding her younger brother?*
- 3. At the time, would you have agreed with the sentence given the parents in the younger brother's death? Do you think it turned out to be the best one?*
- 4. What issues of subjective and objective morality are present in this case?*
- 5. Legally speaking, should Shannon's parents have sought medical treatment for her? Morally speaking, from your religious viewpoint, should they have done so? From their religious viewpoint?*
- 6. Do you think prosecuting Shannon's parents for her death violates her parents' religious freedom? Why or why not?*
- 7. If you had been on the jury, what verdict would you have rendered in this case? Why? As the judge, what sentence would you have given the parents this time if they were convicted? Why?*

## Chapter 3 summary

# Conscience

### 1. What is conscience?

- There are many different theories of conscience.
- The “hunch” theory is based on intuition.
- The “doing what comes naturally” theory is based on the belief that people will naturally do what is right.
- The “little voice” theory assumes that a higher (though difficult to define) force or power guides people’s decisions.
- The “follow the crowd” theory believes moral decisions should be determined by majority opinions.
- The “follow-up feelings” theory is based on one’s emotional reaction to a possible decision.
- The “no conscience” theory denies the existence of conscience and moral guilt.

### 2. The Christian understanding of conscience

- Catholic belief holds that conscience is the ability to reason to, and distinguish, truth and goodness from wrong or evil.
- Using your conscience is using your head to prayerfully determine the most loving thing to do.
- Conscience enlightens us and is the deepest, most sacred heart of ourselves.
- We are obliged to faithfully follow our properly formed and informed conscience.
- Catholic teaching upholds freedom of conscience—especially in religious matters.
- To develop our conscience correctly we must ask God’s guidance, seek wise advice, increase our understanding and compassion, and reflect on Jesus and his teaching. Catholics must also understand and apply Church teaching.
- The rules of conscience tell us: Treat others as you’d want to be treated; respect and never damage another’s conscience; never do evil to achieve good.

### 3. Ethics attitudes

- Some people view right and wrong in terms of earning rewards and avoiding punishments.
- The “me first” attitude results in decisions based on what feels good or bad to me.
- For those with the “it’s the law” attitude, duty and law determine what is right.
- The “aim-to-please” attitude sees what is right as that which pleases others and wrong as that which displeases others.
- The “social standards” attitude determines right and wrong according to commonly accepted social standards.
- The “it’s the principle of the thing” attitude is an understanding of right and wrong in terms of universal ethical principles such as the Golden Rule and, for Christians, other principles Jesus taught.
- Since God loves us all, we should believe in and protect every person’s rights and dignity.

### 4. Social influences on conscience

- Social and cultural ideas affect individuals’ consciences negatively or positively.
- Constant exposure to immoral influences can eventually desensitize one’s conscience.
- To help create the proper moral climate in society, we must protect and develop our own conscience.
- The mass media exert a powerful and often damaging influence on people’s moral sense.
- Catholic teaching urges us to use the media properly in order to uplift rather than harm the human spirit.
- We must assess honestly how our exposure to various media helps or harms us morally.
- We should do our part to positively influence the moral climate around us.
- We should do what we can to make sure that media tools such as advertising benefit rather than harm society.
- Human moral consciousness has developed, and continues to develop—leading to greater moral sensitivity and human fulfillment.
- Beyond the basic commandments, different cultures may evaluate differently the morality of certain actions.
- Morality should help society criticize and better itself in order to become more fully human as Jesus taught us.

## 5. Using your head to make right decisions

- Conscience means using our reasoning ability to try to assess moral matters as God judges them.
- Catholic belief obliges us to follow our properly informed conscience.
- Freedom of conscience is no excuse for doing whatever one pleases.
- The correct moral decision is the best judgment we can make, while attempting to be objectively right.
- Before making major moral decisions, we should think, pray, and consult with others. Catholics should also understand and apply Jesus' teachings and those of the Catholic Church.
- To live in good faith, we must form our conscience conscientiously and correctly and then act according to it.
- The Catholic Church, as do most religions, believes in religious freedom, the free assent to one's religious beliefs and relationship with God.
- Cults violate religious freedom by damaging individuals' ability to make moral decisions of their own free will.
- We should be allowed to seek the truth freely and prayerfully, in a way that respects human dignity and avoids desires and biases that can lead us astray.
- The more correct our conscience is, the more it will accurately perceive and follow objective moral norms.
- Even if our judgment is mistaken, our conscience keeps its dignity if we've sincerely tried our best to correctly form, inform, and follow it.
- Moral decision making is a process and learned skill whose first step is accurately assessing the real moral problem.

### Key concepts

advertising ethics

autonomy

Christian understanding of conscience

common conscience theories

conscience, conscientious judgments

cults

culture and conscience

desensitized conscience

dignity of conscience

ethics attitudes

freedom of conscience

genuine religion

Golden Rule

growth in moral sensitivity

human moral consciousness

identifying the moral problem

informed conscience

integrity

intuition

mass media's influences on conscience

moral decision making process

norms

objective moral norms

peer pressure's influence on conscience

principles

rules of conscience

searching for truth

social influences on conscience