

CONSCIENCE AND LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

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General Moral Conscience (Synderesis)-the capacity to hear God

- A. "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and neighbor." (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 16; CCC, 1776).
- B. Scripture often refers to "the heart" (*Ieb, kardia*). Not mere guilt or a laundry list of sins but the core of whole person-gives us the precious capacity to have a relationship with God:

"O, that today you would hear his voice; harden not your hearts" ([Ps 95:7](#))

"God probes the heart" ([Jer 11:20](#); [Prov 21:2](#), etc)-only God knows our interior. Prophets promise a new heart ([Ezek 36:25-27](#); [Jer 31:31-34](#))-new capacity to hear and be taught by God

God also knows the evil desires which defile that lurk in our hearts (cf. [Matt 15:11-20](#))

"Blest are pure in heart for they shall see God" ([Matt 5:8](#))

- C. Hearing God in prayer and examination of conscience = key to protect this capacity.

"How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God" ([Heb 9:14](#)).

Moral knowledge-forming our consciences

- A. "In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path (cf. [Ps 119:105](#)); we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church" (CCC 1785).
- B. Two kinds of moral knowledge:
 1. Objective-scripture, Church teaching (e.g. the CCC), theology. Involves understanding.
 2. Experiential-personal appropriation and experience of truth. Only this is real moral knowledge.
Aspects:

- a. receiving revelation in prayer-the Holy Spirit bringing the truth to life.
- b. being convicted of sin and receiving freedom as God's children through repentance (vs. condemnation or false guilt). Corresponds to teachings on the blood and cross.
- c. Forming conscience through testing ourselves ([1 Cor 11: 28](#); [Gal 6:4](#)), discerning what is of value ([Phil 1:10](#)) what is God's will through renewal of our minds ([Rom 12:2](#))
- d. acting on this truth in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. [Matt 7:21-27](#); [Jn 14:15](#))
- e. "baking the bread of the Word" (Fathers of the Church): strip husk of human coverings; extract living grain by reading in faith; grind into flour through meditation, experience, action; water with frequent prayer; purify / bake through fire of trials).
- f. growing in freedom through action (virtue, holiness).
 - moral rules (e.g. 10 commandments) as external minimum
 - become interior source of action through work of the Holy Spirit-the law written on our hearts ([Jer 31:31-34](#)-compare [Matt 5: 21-22, 27-28](#))
 - life in the Spirit = "fulfillment" of the righteous demands of the law ([Rom 8:4](#))

Making Judgments of Conscience (Syneidesis)

- A. Faced with a moral choice, conscience can either make a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law, or on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them . . . To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts" (CCC, 1786, 1788).
- B. Reasoning in Faith. In the New Testament judgments of conscience involves faith or the action of the Holy Spirit-not merely human reason. Prudence is both acquired and infused.
- C. My judgments of conscience binding on me-not others (e.g. attendance at prayer meeting vs. family event).
- D. Judgments can be wrong (e.g. I should tell a lie in order to escape a difficult situation, watch TV versus go to fellowship group). Requires charity of brethren (cf. [1 Cor 8](#); [1 Jn 5:16](#)).
- E. Importance of knowing interior motives-can be deceived by evil one, moved by self-interest, pride, sloth (i.e., the flesh), worldly patterns of thinking even if not choosing something objectively wrong. Need discernment-can I hear the Spirit's voice and distinguish it from these other impulses?
- F. Need brethren to help us discern and grow, to challenge us, to encourage us to "put out into the deep."

Questions for Prayer, Study and Fellowship Groups

1. What is an example from your own life when you experienced false guilt (i.e., condemnation), and what is an example when you experienced the Holy Spirit convicting you of sin to set you free? What were the differences between these experiences?

2. Using a concordance or cross-references, find as many texts as you can in the New Testament that deal with conscience (syneidesis). How does scripture connect this capacity with faith and the work of the Spirit?
3. How is conscience a gift helping us to go deeper in our relationship with God?
4. Read [Rom 8:2](#) and [2 Cor 5:14](#). Have you ever experienced a change where a moral obligation went from being an external norm that felt constricting, to a free inner compulsion from the Holy Spirit?
5. Read [1 Cor 11: 28](#); [Gal 6:4](#); [Phil 1:10](#); [Col 1:9-10](#); and [Rom 12:2](#). What does scripture teach about how we can discern and do what is pleasing to God?
6. How is it that the saints in heaven who cannot choose evil are actually more free than we who can? What does this teach us about freedom?