



HIGHLIGHTS FOR TALK 7

WHY AND HOW MUST I FORM MY CONSCIENCE, AND AVOID SIN?

- ❖ Venerable Pope Pius XII once noted that “the sin of the [20th] century is the loss of the sense of sin”. He recognized that people were becoming indifferent about right and wrong, and that they were no longer standing up properly for the truth.
- ❖ When people become indifferent to right and wrong, they lose their moral dignity -- a trait that distinguishes human beings from mere animals.
- ❖ The mistaken modern belief that there could be greater freedom without morality has triggered a breakdown of belief in objective truth, resulting in common rejection of authority and widespread confusion. The Church and all of society have been deeply affected by this moral crisis.
- ❖ The moral crisis brought many people to reject the Church’s guidance. They began instead to promote mistaken understandings of freedom and love, while denying that the Church’s teachings should be held in higher esteem than subjective opinion.
- ❖ The Church responded to the moral crisis with compassion and understanding, but without changing her teachings. She continued reaching out to clarify her positions on matters of faith and morals, which were under attack then as they still are today. That is why it is so important that we take to heart and stand up for the Church’s teachings.
- ❖ The mending of society’s moral fabric falls to us mothers in a special way, since we naturally take a lead role in passing the faith and moral principles on to our children at home.
- ❖ In that light, there is nothing more important to the education of our children than the formation of their consciences. It is critical that they learn to tell right from wrong. Success in education cannot be measured simply in terms of report cards, talents, or public achievements. The truly well-educated child is the one who lives virtue -- the one who knows and does what is good.
- ❖ Sin is an offense against God. When we sin, we deny our Creator the love we owe Him by elevating love for our own egos over the love of God. Sin is “diametrically opposed” to Christ’s life of loving obedience to the Father (CCC 1850).
- ❖ We are responsible for our own errors, for sin’s “root is in the heart of man, in his free will” (CCC 1853). Sin results from a freely made wrong personal choice. No one can coerce our will and force us to sin.
- ❖ Yet true freedom and sin are in conflict with one another. True freedom is realized by choosing what is good. Yes, we are “free” to make bad choices (free will; “horizontal” freedom); but in doing so we abuse our freedom to choose well and be good (*libertas*; “vertical” freedom).
- ❖ While we always remain responsible for our choices, each time we sin, our will gets weaker, which makes the good harder to choose the next time. If we repeatedly surrender to sin, we put ourselves in danger of habitual vice, a pattern of bad behavior that is hard to break.



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- ❖ On the other hand, when we act virtuously, we use our freedom well and cause it to flourish. Each act of virtue makes the good easier to choose the next time, and so we grow in goodness and -- with God's grace -- in sanctity.
- ❖ There is a difference between sin and temptation. We experience temptation when we are attracted to doing something evil. But we do not commit a sin unless we assent -- or say "yes" to -- the evil, whether interiorly or exteriorly. When we do not give in to the attraction, we overcome temptation and reject sin. By struggling with God's grace to overcome temptation, we demonstrate our love for Him. So temptation, though threatening, can actually work out to our benefit; whereas there never is any benefit to sin.
- ❖ The personal sins we commit are called actual sins. An actual sin is "doing something that God has forbidden (a sin of commission) or failing to do something that God has commanded (a sin of omission)" (Trese 54).
- ❖ Depending on its degree of seriousness, an actual sin can be either venial or mortal. A venial sin is disobeying the moral law in a less serious matter -- or in serious matters where there is ignorance or less than full consent -- that does not amount to a rejection of God (Trese 50). Left unchecked, though, venial sins can "dispose us little by little to [eventually] commit mortal sin" (CCC 1863).
- ❖ A mortal sin is "a deadly offense against God that destroys the life of grace in the soul" (*A Guide for Confession*, Archdiocese of St. Louis). For a sin to be mortal, it must meet all three of the following conditions: 1.) the matter must be serious; 2.) one must have full knowledge that it is serious; and 3.) one must give free and deliberate consent to the act (CCC 1857). Speedy recourse to God's mercy in the Sacrament of Confession is the sure and effective means for mortal sin to be forgiven and for the sinner to be restored to the state of grace. Unrepented mortal sin leaves a person in danger of eternal loss (CCC 1864).
- ❖ Christian tradition has identified seven deep character flaws around which actual sins cluster. These "seven capital (or deadly) sins" are: lust (concupiscence); gluttony (indulgence); greed (avarice); sloth (apathy); wrath (anger); envy (resentfulness); and pride (egotism) (Trese 59). They are called "capital" sins because they give rise to other sins and vices. Yet each of the seven capital sins stands opposed by one of the "seven heavenly virtues": chastity opposes lust; temperance opposes gluttony; charity opposes greed; diligence opposes sloth; patience opposes wrath; kindness opposes envy; and humility opposes pride.
- ❖ It is recommended that we try to identify which vice gives us the most trouble. That vice is called one's "predominant" fault. Being aware of your predominant fault helps you to be more on guard against succumbing to it. Struggling with one's faults is a life-long battle.
- ❖ Our Lord in His Sacred Humanity and His Mother Mary never sinned; they pleased God in every moment of their lives. The rest of us are sinners because we were born with original sin, and are thus prone to actual sin throughout our lives. Thankfully, God gave us the Sacrament of Baptism as a first cleansing of original sin and all other sins; and the Sacrament of Confession to take away our post-baptismal sins as often as needed.
- ❖ In Confession, we present ourselves before Our Lord (as represented by the priest) to take personal responsibility for the sins we've committed against Him.



- ❖ Once we've confessed all the sins we can remember committing since our last Confession, and expressed true sorrow for them with sincere resolve to sin no more, the priest grants us absolution, at which time God forgives us and takes away our sins. After a good Confession, one's soul is free of sin, since God has completely forgiven them and taken them away. But we do still have to make amends by doing the penance the priest gives us; by repairing to the extent possible any harm done to our neighbors; and by accepting any just consequences for our misdeeds.
- ❖ The key to staying in the grace of God is to return to Confession often -- once a month is a good goal to start with. Through frequent Confession, God can keep putting things back in order when we've made a mess of them.
- ❖ In preparing to make a good Confession, it is important to know how to examine one's conscience.
- ❖ Conscience is "a judgment of our reason [that tells us] what is right or wrong in our conduct" (Burke 27). It warns us against evil when we face a moral decision, and it accuses us of evil when we have sinned.
- ❖ Conscience begins to develop in early youth when children start to absorb the basic principles of right and wrong from their parents and teachers. As children continue to grow, these principles have to be tested, adjusted, and renewed in the light of truth if they are to result in a healthy conscience.
- ❖ A conscience is healthy "when it tends to judge in accordance with objective truth. It is unhealthy when the principles by which it judges are, objectively speaking, false" (Burke 23).
- ❖ There are two kinds of unhealthy consciences. The "static" conscience does not accept enough responsibility for its development, preferring to let the Church or others work out every moral problem -- whereas the "rebellious" conscience claims that every moral issue is a matter of individual choice and denies its need for direction from God or persons in authority. Between these two extremes is the healthy conscience, which takes personal responsibility for its education and development while accepting counsel and direction from the Church and those in authority.
- ❖ Modern culture is full of skepticism "as to the existence of any real or objective truth -- about man, about his destiny, about the worth of his actions". At the same time, man "cannot escape the sense that his choices matter" -- that they bear meaningful consequences in his life. Therefore, he must have a way "to measure the worth and direction of his choices" (Burke 1-2).
- ❖ It is not the conscience's job to be its own moral standard; its job is to apply the standards of the moral law -- the source of which is ultimately Jesus Christ Himself ('I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.' Jn 14:6). "Those who understand Christianity as the following of Jesus Christ must realize clearly that to follow Jesus means to accept and to follow an objective standard of truth" (Burke 6).
- ❖ When people speak of "freedom of conscience," it seems rare that they understand its true meaning, which is "the freedom to seek the truth". Instead, they take it to mean "the freedom to create the truth" -- which does not exist, because "truth is uncreated. It is not man's invention" (Burke 13). Only falsehood can be manipulated and bent to man's purpose,



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because “falsehood is a product of the human mind -- [whereas] the truth is God’s product” (Burke 15).

- ❖ The idea that we can create truth is attractive “to those who prefer not to be burdened with any genuine moral norm, who *do not want* to be given any true standard of goodness and badness whereby to govern their actions” (Burke 96).
- ❖ If we are not ready “to face up to the truth or to the demands of conscience, however inconvenient or exacting,” we will never be truly free (Burke 31).
- ❖ Freedom “is not the power to do what you like. It is something much more important. It is the power to be fully oneself -- to realize fully one’s potential as a [human being]” (Burke 53).
- ❖ The two greatest needs of man are his “need for truth and his need for goodness, [i.e.] his need to know and his need to love” (Burke 72). A man “wants to know...truth without limit. And he wants to find and possess...infinite goodness” (Burke 73). In other words, *he wants God*. (Burke 73)
- ❖ The Church is man’s vehicle to God. She has the authority “to teach the truth about the way to heaven. No one is forced to believe in the teachings of the Church...The Church’s authority influences us only insofar as we freely accept it” (Burke 43, 86). If anyone happens to deny a teaching of the Church, then that person’s view is simply not a Catholic one. “The Church’s authoritative teaching does not force conscience; it informs it...In doing so it does not take away personal freedom. It simply makes it easier for us to exercise it, if we wish, in choosing roads that are divinely guaranteed to lead to heaven” (Burke 46).
- ❖ “Those who do not believe in the truth...or cannot find Christ in the Church will regard any exercise of teaching authority in the Church as a threat to [their] freedom. [But] those who see reasons to trust the Church’s authority...will regard the teaching authority of the Church as an ally of their freedom. (‘You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’ Jn 8:32)” (Burke 89).