

CONSCIENCE PASTORAL – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Is there a contradiction between freedom and truth?

Although our modern world tends to find cause for hesitancy before the prospect of absolute truth; that is, truth that is universal, our freedom actually depends upon such a truth. If there were no truth there could be no ground for personal dignity other than the majority or no way to work for the common good apart from utility. And yet, if we are reflective, our own personal experience informs us that there is such a truth. For example, that truth should be told, that respect should be shown, that good should be pursued and evil avoided. That truth that sets our freedom free is the natural law – the way that the human person can deliberate about the good.

2. Is there a contradiction between faith and reason?

Because there is a unity to the truth, there is not a contradiction between faith and reason. Human understanding is a great gift and by thinking and reasoning the person can come to truth. But love, if it is our fulfillment, cannot be explained merely by reason. Love must be revealed. God revealed this truth to Israel and fulfilled it in Christ. For Christians, the truth is ultimately a person who reveals the truth about God and the truth about man in his own person: Jesus Christ. Thus, reason's search finds its fulfillment not its negation in faith.

3. Does the Church intend that the State be religious?

The Church recognizes the State's distinctive responsibility to serve the common good. This means that representatives of the people are called to discern policies and laws that serve the common good; ie, the good of all. The Church's unique competency is that she is an expert on the person and therefore it is essential that she continue to propose this truth to the State. For human laws must respect the natural law if, in fact, they will be laws that serve the person and help to realize the common good.

4. Are there actions which are always wrong, so called intrinsically evil acts?

Yes, the Christian moral tradition has always recognized intrinsically evil acts; i.e., acts which are always and everywhere wrong. One such action is the direct taking of an innocent human life such as occurs in abortion or intentional homicide. In teaching the truth of such intrinsically evil acts the Church does not mean to limit human freedom but to serve it, to witness to the truth that sets us free.

5. Why is our conscience so necessary?

Our conscience is the way in which the human person comes to the truth about fulfillment precisely because it acknowledges, when formed, the sapiential nature of God who is love. Because God is love, God has directed all things to their end, to their fulfillment. The human person always acts for his or her own fulfillment but often we are our own worst enemy – we are the agents of our unhappiness! Conscience is the gift whereby we can come to know and act according to our true end and thereby be fulfilled by a “good” which is without end namely, sharing in the exchange of divine love.

6. What is an erroneous conscience?

An erroneous conscience is a conscience that renders a wrong judgment about the good in a concrete circumstance. For example, a married man who thought he deserved an intimate relationship with someone who was not his spouse would have an erroneous conscience. The opposite of an erroneous conscience is a correct conscience.

7. What is the difference between a formed and unformed conscience?

A formed conscience is one which is informed by the truth of the natural law and the new law of love fulfilled in Christ. As such, a formed conscience is not simply a referent for what one wants to do or feels like doing but one which invites the individual to love. Because one has the duty to form one’s conscience in the truth – and this is only a logical necessity if one desires to love, to do good and not evil – one has a responsibility to learn the truth and to bind one’s freedom to the truth.

8. What is the difference between a vincible and invincible conscience?

Because one has an obligation to form one’s conscience in the truth there is a presumption that one is responsible for judging correctly the difference between right and wrong. A vincible conscience is a conscience that should have known something one did not know and therefore bears responsibility for that ignorance which led them to act wrongly. The category invincible conscience is one which acknowledges that at times through no fault of our own – ie, we are trying to know the truth – we make decisions which are wrong.