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Faith Today

On the field of conscience

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

"I remember when I was a little girl — oh, 6 or 7 years old, I'd say. We lived out from town a good way. Our house sat in the middle of a big cotton field. Daddy always liked to grow cotton.

"Anyway, it was cotton picking time one year, must have been about 1930. A worker came by looking for a job and so daddy hired him. The man was black.

"Now when we had other field hands, they would always come in and eat dinner with us inside the house. But not this time. The man had to sit down outside in the sun and eat. I never will forget that. I remember watching him. I didn't feel good about it. It just wasn't right."

The woman who told me that story recognizes that the incident was perhaps her first encounter with racial prejudice. And she says it caused one of the initial stirrings of that built-in aptitude for making moral judgments, more commonly called conscience.

I remember being told as a youngster that my conscience was a "little voice" that would help me know right from wrong. Not so surprisingly, Vatican II also described the conscience as a "voice," though it went on in a more substantive way.

Conscience, says the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, is "a law inscribed by God" on the heart of the human person.

Conscience is one's "most secret core and sanctuary," the document goes on to say. There a person "is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths."

But how is a conscience formed? Does it develop, expand?

In his book, "Guide to Christian Living" (Christian Classics Inc.), Father George Lobo suggests that the rightly formed conscience is: 1) rational; 2) free; 3) concerned about others and 4) responsible.

With these characteristics in mind, let's return to the woman's childhood story.

Even with the mind of a child,



How does a conscience begin to take shape? For one little girl growing up in the 1930s, writes Joe Michael Feist, conscience was aroused when she saw a man forced to eat his dinner alone and outside in the heat of the day. It was something she never forgot.

the woman was able to determine that the black man was not being treated in a fair and equal manner. Thus the first requirement for forming a conscience: the ability to assess a situation calmly and accurately.

The second characteristic of conscience is that it is free and independent. Despite what she was being conditioned to believe about the races, the little girl was able to make a judgment about the situation that probably differed from the judgment of others around her. She was able to see the world from her own perspective.

Watching the black man eat dinner outside in the heat of the day obviously aroused feelings of empathy in the young girl. She "didn't feel good about it," she recalled. Her concern for someone else's welfare shows another aspect of a rightly formed conscience.

Finally, a person with a well-formed conscience should be willing to accept responsibility for actions based on it. At times this could lead to unpleasant or even painful encounters.

Again, consider the woman's story. What do you think she should have done, or could have done, in light of her conscience?

The fact of the matter is that the woman remembers being, more than anything else, confused by what she had seen. Perhaps at that formative stage in her life she hadn't yet sorted through the complicated web of authority and obedience, or of the imperfections and contradictions that are part of each of us — even parents.

What is most important, though, is that she did eventually sort through those contradictions. She continued to wrestle with the demands of her conscience, and her conscience expanded.

"Later on," the woman concluded, "when I was older, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to be part of that cycle of hatred. I began to speak out against what was unjust, even when it was difficult to do. My conscience wouldn't let me do anything else."

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)