

Role of conscience root of Eucharist dispute

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

ROME — At the root of the controversy over reception of Communion by Catholics in unapproved second marriages is a more basic moral dilemma.

What happens when a person's conscience — a conscience the person believes to be well-formed — cannot accept a specific church teaching or law? Does conscience override a binding teaching or does the teaching take precedence?

In theory, the question has remained open throughout Christian history. Pastorally, it often boils down to finding a balance in given cases.

Three German bishops said the problem is "to rightly determine the relationship of generally valid norms to the personal decision of conscience." The bishops had favored reception of Communion by individuals in invalid second marriages in certain cases when their decision in conscience conflicted with the general law.

"People of our time have a great sensitivity as to how the two poles are mediated," they said after the Vatican reaffirmed that Catholics in unapproved marriages cannot receive Communion.

Catholics face the dilemma of conscience vs. church teaching when deciding how to act morally in complex, real-life situations that may not fit a specific teaching or law. Many then pour out their hearts and souls to priests who must decide — on the spot and often in the confessional — what the relationship between conscience and teaching is in each case.

One example is widespread opposition by Catholic couples to the church's teaching that artificial contraception is immoral. Studies in numerous countries show that a majority of Catholics, citing conscience, ignore the teaching.

The new "Catechism of the Catholic Church" says that conscience enjoins a person "to do good and avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil."

The catechism adds: "Man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of divine law."

In formation of a conscience the key ingredients are the word of God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit "aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the church," says the catechism.

As a rule-of-thumb, conscience could be defined as: the voice of God (faith) within a person trying to express itself externally through good actions.

The divorced-remarried Catholic controversy emerged in mid-October when the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirmed the norm that Communion is prohibited to Catholics in in-

valid second marriages.

Previously, the three German bishops had asked priests to accept the decision to receive Communion of Catholics in unapproved second marriages if in good conscience they thought their first union was invalid. A pivotal criterion was that the individual make the decision after consultations with a priest so that they were aware of the church teaching.

Given the doctrinal congregation stand, the German bishops dropped their policy but

reaffirmed their moral reasoning, based on respect for a well-formed conscience and the need for "pastoral flexibility."

Their theological sparring with the Vatican highlighted the conscience vs. teaching dilemma.

The doctrinal congregation called it a "mistaken conviction" to believe that "personal conscience is considered in the final analysis to be able, on the basis of one's own convictions, to come to a decision about the existence or absence of a pre-

vious marriage."

Church courts must decide "whether there is objectively such a nullity of marriage" because there are "canonical laws binding in conscience," said the doctrinal congregation.

The congregation was following the policy of Pope John Paul II, who has warned that overemphasis on conscience can permit too much subjectivity in moral decisions.

The pope's 1993 encyclical, "The Splendor of Truth," says that a "radically subjectivist concept of moral judgment" has found its way into some theology which would grant "the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly."

The German bishops, in answer to the doctrinal congregation, noted that "canon law can only posit a generally valid

order of things; it cannot, however, regulate all individual cases, which are often very complex."

They quoted from Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Liberty: "It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the divine law."

Supporters of the German bishops said that Vatican reasoning could lead to measuring the morality of an act primarily through its conformity to a church teaching or law, virtually ignoring a person's internal decision-making process and the unique circumstances of concrete situations.

Retired French Bishop Armand Le Bourgeois complained that in the case of a Catholic in a second marriage it would mean that the person is unable to make a decision in conscience about his or her marriage unless there was a church court ruling.

Clustered parishes set to mark Marriage Day

ROCHESTER — Father, David P. Reid, SS.CC., pastor of the St. Francis of Assisi/Ss. Peter and Paul Parish Cluster, will celebrate a Mass marking World Marriage Day on Saturday, Feb. 11, at 4:30 p.m. at St. Francis of Assisi Church, 77

Whitney St. Sponsored by World Marriage Encounter, Inc., World Marriage Day is celebrated each year on the second Sunday of February. The Mass is open to all people, married or otherwise.

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