

Church puts high priority on conscience

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

Recently a letter came to me asking whether the church really wants us to obey our consciences and not "just do what the church says." This sent me on a search for some ways to talk about the church's "official" view of conscience. It was not difficult to locate some passages that can help all of us to understand how the church views the relationship of conscience and the moral life.

In the document called "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*) from the Second Vatican Council, we find what I think is the most eloquent statement about conscience to be found anywhere. In fact, the authors of the New Catechism chose this passage to begin their own section on conscience. With some minor editing to make its phrasing apply to all human beings, the passage reads:

"Deep within our consciences we find a law which we have not laid upon ourselves, but which we must obey. Its voice, ever calling us to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in our hearts at the right moment.... For we have in our hearts a law inscribed by God... Our consciences are our most secret core and our sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths." #16

This passage presents in a nutshell



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the priority the church grants in its most authoritative documents to the role of conscience. It also hints at why the church has held for centuries that we must obey our consciences. The reason is that in the church's view, conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a human person; conscience is that center of the self where we are alone with God, and where God's voice echoes in our depth.

Further evidence of how seriously the church treats the exercise of conscience can be found in the "Declaration on Religious Liberty" (*Dignitatis humanae*) also from the Council. A statement from no. 14 of that document reads: "In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faith-

ful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the church."

What is interesting here is the phrase "to attend to." In an earlier draft of this passage, it was proposed that this sentence read: "...the Christian faithful ought to form their consciences according to the teaching of the church." This statement was rejected in the final draft in favor of the less restrictive phrase "to attend to." By accepting this less restrictive meaning, the council affirmed that our obligation to follow the teaching of the church does not make it the exclusive basis of moral judgment. While we surely must pay attention to the teaching of the church and give it authority in our decision making, we also must consider the circumstances and other personal factors that constitute the concrete situations in which we must act.

Another example of an official church document moving to a less restrictive interpretation of the role of church teaching in the formation of conscience is found in Paul VI's famous encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. In dealing with the question of artificial contraceptive, the first draft of that document stated: "The choice of contraceptive methods must be found in accordance with the norms proposed by the church's teaching."

Had this statement been accepted, it would make the magisterial teaching the only and exclusive basis of any

judgment about contraceptive methods. But this statement was not accepted. Instead, the final draft of the encyclical reads like this: "The judgment about the contraceptive method must include in the conscientious examination the objective norms proposed by the church's teaching office."

These three examples from church documents show how very seriously the church takes our exercise of conscience. Traditionally, and even to this day, conscience has been regarded as the "ultimate subjective norm" of morality. The teaching on conscience completes the church's teaching on objective norms of the moral life. We are responsible for our actions in the concrete, even while we must take into account with utter seriousness the teachings of our church.

Clearly, we must grant to church teaching the authority it claims and the presumption that it is right. But the church insists upon being our moral teacher — "magisterium" means "teacher" — and not our moral parent, making our decisions for us.

The Catholic faith includes a richly textured tradition of thought on the moral life. We do it a grave injustice if we try to oversimplify it or make it something less than what it is. We have a strong body of objective moral teachings on issues. But we also have a strong, centuries-old teaching on the relationship between those objective teachings and our subjective exercise of conscience.

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