

KEY TERMS

Conscience: A judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act.

THE DRIVE OF YOUR LIFE!

CALIBRATE YOUR COMPASS

Compasses used to be very important. Today, we have mostly replaced them with GPS systems and Google Maps, but the idea is the same. These are tools that help us get to where we want to go.

God knew that we would face problems that make us feel lost. He knew that we would be faced with difficult decisions, not necessarily knowing how we got there. So He gave us a spiritual compass so that we can always know how to get to our ultimate destination: heaven. This compass is called our conscience.

Our conscience is the inner voice that reminds us of God's Law. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied that when God gave us the New Covenant, He would "place his law within [us] and write it on [our] hearts." This is what our conscience does: it helps us to live according to God's Law and to avoid sin. And if we form our consciences well, then our conscience will speak God's words to us.

Jeremiah 31:33, CCC 1777

However, near a strong enough magnetic field, a compass stops pointing north and instead points in the direction of the magnet. Or if we don't update or charge our GPS, we get lost. Our consciences sometimes do something similar. We aren't perfect and neither is our understanding of God's law. Sometimes certain topics, or problems, or decisions can act as "magnets" or "un-updated software" to our spiritual compasses, pointing us in the wrong direction.

Sometimes our conscience tells us it's okay to copy our friend's homework and turn it in as our own; we were really busy last night, and it's not important anyway. Or you might find yourself saying that it's okay to tell that lie to your parents about where you are going: it's not like it's going to be dangerous or anything. Or maybe you've thought it's okay to go to that party and get drunk: everyone else is doing it.

We aren't born with perfect consciences; we need to train our conscience to choose the good. We need to calibrate our compasses or update our GPS's.

CCC 1783

BLISSFULLY IGNORANT?

See, everyone is going to follow his or her conscience. In fact, the Church tells us that we have to follow our conscience. Otherwise we are intentionally doing something that we believe to be wrong. It would be like taking a test, knowing the correct answer is "A," but choosing "B" anyway. The real problem occurs when we really think the correct answer is "B" but it turns out to be "A." And just because we didn't know it was wrong doesn't mean we aren't responsible. In fact, in some cases, we might be more responsible.

CCC 1790

Stick with the analogy of the test for a minute. What possible reasons could there be for you to think that a wrong answer is actually the right one?

Give teens some time to answer this question out loud. Typical answers may be: the teacher was trying to trick us, I didn't study, I didn't do the reading, etc.

Sometimes, a teacher might not prepare you well enough for a certain question and so you get it wrong. In that case, the teacher might throw that question out because

it's not your fault that you got it wrong. In the same way, sometimes when we do something wrong out of ignorance, we aren't as responsible for it. This is called "invincible ignorance." Invincible ignorance is when we are ignorant of an issue on morality because there is something preventing us from overcoming that ignorance (mental capacity, life-situation, learning ability). In this instance, our responsibility for our errors is lessened or completely removed.

CCC 1793

But sometimes we get a question wrong because the teacher told us to read pages five to eight and we said, "Nahhh." The information was readily available to us, and we should have known it. We just didn't put the work in. In that same way, God expects us to put the work in and to learn what He teaches and understand why He teaches that. If we don't, we can end up being more responsible for doing something wrong, even though we thought it was right. This is called "vincible ignorance." Vincible ignorance is when we are ignorant of an issue of morality but can and should overcome it. In this instance, we are held responsible for errors in judgment.

CCC 1791

FORMED FOR HEAVEN

We have to properly form our conscience so that we can make the best possible decision for the scenarios that present themselves in our lives.

There are some simple, concrete steps you can take to start forming your conscience so that, when you hear the voice of conscience within you, you can trust that it is God speaking to you:

1. Read the Bible—This may seem so simple, but we don't do it often enough.
2 Timothy 3:16, CCC 104
2. Read the teachings of the Church—Get familiar with the Catechism and the writings of the saints. Read the encyclicals of the pope when they come out. Don't just know what the Church teaches, know why the Church teaches that so you can apply those same principles to other things later on.
3. Ask someone who knows—Find a confidant, a mentor, or someone who you trust to lead you down the right path. Even Jesus didn't go many places alone, why should we? Find someone who you can ask about what the Church teaches about a specific situation and who you can ask for personal advice.
4. Pray—Again this seems so simple, but how often do we forget to ask God what we should do about a specific situation?

Let us strive to form our consciences intentionally. If we aren't careful, if we consume more secular information than Sacred information, we are more likely to find our conscience out of line with God's teaching and pointing us in the wrong direction. If we don't take care to form our conscience well, to build it on the solid foundation of God Himself, we are taking our eternal life in our hands.