

Crafting a CATHOLIC Conscience

by William A. Donohue

In some Catholic quarters, it has become commonplace to assert that Catholics are free to do what their conscience instructs. But if this were the case, then there is nothing particularly Catholic about this position. After all, are not agnostics and atheists also free to let their conscience decide moral questions?

The Catholic Church certainly recognizes the importance of conscience, but it stresses the primacy of a “well-formed” conscience. I will leave it to the theologians to detail the history and development of this idea, and I will not attempt to offer a blueprint of the contents of what a “well-formed” conscience might look like, but I will examine what it means to a sociologist.

All societies are held together either by coercion or consensus, the former being the rule in history and the latter being most critical to societies that claim to be democratic and free. Societies forged on coercion need not depend on rallying the conscience of the people, and this is because the people are literally the subjects of the existing regime. To be sure, the subjects must legitimate the rule of their rulers, but this can be done through passive acquiescence. Not so in a democracy.

Democratic governance requires that the people bond together on the basis of a moral consensus. This does not mean that everyone must agree on the meaning of right and wrong, but it does presuppose that there is general agreement as to what constitutes right and wrong. The alternative is cultural chaos, the end result of which is called anarchy. As Judge

Robert Bork as astutely noted in *Slouching Towards Gemorrah*, this is a condition we are fast approaching.

One reason why the U.S. is in such disarray is the absence of “well-formed” consciences. Even worse, the very suggestion that a conscience should be “well-formed” is likely to be met with visceral rejection. The predictable refrain is, “Who will do the forming”? May I be so bold as to suggest that everyone, non-Catholic as well as Catholic, could profit by looking to the teachings of the Catholic Church. This is not to say that other religions teach us nothing of importance, but it is to say that Catholicism is richly textured and provides a thick base upon which all of us can draw.

In the end, a “well-formed” conscience must do what Tocqueville once argued, and that is to get one’s eyes off of one’s self. It was to religion that Tocqueville repaired to for guidance, and his religion was Catholicism.

Catholicism does not neglect the individual, but it does not forget the community in which he lives, either. A conscience that directs the individual to do what he wants has nothing to do with this understanding. But a conscience that is formed by squaring self-interest with the common good is another matter altogether. It allows for a moral consensus to exist and thus gives life to freedom.

If crafting a Catholic conscience means anything, it means that the precepts of the Church must be understood, accepted and acted upon with regularity. To be sure, this is a tall order. But not to do so is to allow self-interest to reign without consequence, and history has taught us all too well that this soon becomes nothing but passion, pure and simple.

What this means for Catholic parents is foreboding. How can they craft a conscience in their children that reflects the Catholic tradition? For starters, they can acquaint themselves with the Catholic Catechism. They can also tell their children

that the Ten Commandments provide us with a platform for deciding right and wrong, and that the Church faithfully tries to incorporate those lessons into its own teachings. In addition, they can teach their children that an examination of conscience is predicated on recognizing the authority of God, and no one else.

My uncle, Johnny McGetrick, is fond of telling me how much he learned from the Jesuit tradition at Fordham. What he learned was a set of principles that enabled him to craft his conscience in a way that was intelligible, reasonable and coherent. Unfortunately, his training seems pedantic, if not quaint, by today's standards, but it nonetheless gave him an indispensable reference upon which to act. We could do worse than attempting to revisit that tradition.