

Making moral decisions demands mature responsibility. To seek to understand reality, to be attentive to the wisdom of the past, to discern the biases and demands of a particular situation—all of these efforts require a mature decision-maker. All of them hinge on the central role of conscience.

Conscience is a much-used—and sometimes abused—word. Accordingly, in this chapter we will take a close look at conscience and one of its most important dialogue partners, authority.

We sometimes describe conscience as a “little voice” inside our mind telling us what to do; sometimes we picture conscience as an inner police officer or as parent tapes. Such images are not satisfactory. The conscience is really the personal self as it tries to make sound judgments about our basic moral questions: “What ought I/we to be?” and “What ought I/we to do?”

Vatican II stressed both the meaning and the use of conscience. In its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (16), the Council called conscience the individual’s most secret core and sanctuary where one is alone with God. There the person discovers a law inscribed by God to love, to do what is good and to avoid evil. The document states that human dignity lies in observing this law and that the person will be judged by it. Through loyalty to conscience, the Council continues, Christians are united with other people in the search for truth and for the right solution to individual and social moral problems.

Accordingly, people will want to be guided by objective standards of moral conduct. The Council adds that conscience can go astray through ignorance without losing its dignity. This is not the case, however, of the person who really does not seek to find out the true and good.

The same Council’s *Declaration on Religious Liberty* added that persons, “that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore bearing personal responsibility, are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth” (2). The document points out that this search for truth must be done in a way appropriate to the human social nature, that is, by free inquiry with the help of teaching, communication and dialogue. The highest norm of life, divine law, is recognized

through conscience. In order, then, to come to one's final end and fulfillment, God, the individual must follow this conscience faithfully.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF CONSCIENCE

In *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, Timothy O'Connell summarizes the tradition and presents a very concise and helpful picture of conscience, describing it as three different dimensions of a person.

The first dimension of conscience is the general sense of value that is characteristic of the human being. We are aware that we should do good and avoid evil. A sure sign of this general awareness is the fact that people argue about right and wrong. There would be no debate if we did not experience the responsibility of choosing between good and evil. Our desire to do the right thing reflects this general sense of value.

The second dimension of conscience is the search to discover the right course of action. This probing into human behavior and the world is the search for truth. If we are honest in our search, then we turn to a variety of sources for wisdom and guidance: for example, Scripture, the church, the physical and human sciences, tradition, competent professional advice.

We may often encounter conflict in this search, for we can discover a variety of interpretations of the truth. Life leads us to a number of different communities: political, social, economic, religious. These different communities all have their "experts," along with their fundamental values, meanings and messages. Our search for truth must recognize and weigh these at times competing values and meanings. Our final judgment about the moral issue facing us necessarily implies choosing which community is most significant for us, which community's values and worldview provide the basis of our own. For example, faced with a serious business dilemma, we might base our decision on the maximization of profit (influenced by the economic community) or on the value of respect for persons (influenced by the religious community).

The third dimension of conscience is the actual, concrete judgment that we make pertaining to an immediate action. After searching for the truth, we reach a point when a specific decision must be made.

Many of us have said, "I must follow my conscience." This principle is absolutely true—if it is properly understood. It also presupposes something very important: that the work of the conscience at the second dimension—

gathering the data—is fully informed. This process is also known as the formation of conscience. In other words, I must follow my decision (third dimension) only after I have done my best to search for truth concerning the issue facing me (second dimension). Following my conscience does not mean doing what I feel like doing. It does mean the work—often hard work—of discerning what is right and what is wrong.

In the example of amputating an arm, this discernment was fairly clear. Mrs. Bergmeier's situation, however, posed more challenging questions and ambiguities. Her search for truth, as we suggested in chapter two, was more complicated, more demanding. But the discerning process, the use of conscience, was fundamentally the same as in the simpler case.

As Vatican II reminded us, conscience can go astray without losing its dignity. A person could do the very best searching for the truth but still miss the mark. As a result, the decision reached might not be the one which would best lead to human fulfillment. Nonetheless, the individual must follow this decision (again, on the condition that the person really tried to discover the truth). The conscience is the individual's supreme court; its judgment must be followed.

Obviously, caution is essential here: caution on the part of the decision-maker and caution on the part of one who observes the action. The decision-maker must be careful to search for the truth of the particular issue. One can be blinded by one's own desires and so miss the realities of the situation. (*The Church in the Modern World*, especially 30 and 37, reminded us of this possibility, too.) Or one can simply be confronted with a complex situation in which the realities are difficult to discern.

The observer of the action (as we were of Mrs. Bergmeier's story) must also exercise caution. Surely the observer must search for truth and take a stand on issues. Even if the decision contradicts the one made by the decision-maker, however, the observer recognizes the impossibility of entering fully into the other's discerning process, the other's conscience. Thus the suggested evaluation of Mrs. Bergmeier's dilemma concluded that she ought not to seek to become pregnant, that her decision was the wrong decision, that there was not a sufficient reason for her infidelity. Still, we cannot judge Mrs. Bergmeier; we cannot call her morally evil. She may have done her very best in searching for the truth and may have honestly concluded that she was right in seeking out the friendly guard.

AUTHORITY

Many of the situations which confront us are also complex. That is why we cannot simply solve every issue by ourselves. We need guidance. We need to turn to Scripture and tradition and various kinds of authorities for help. This is where law and authority properly fit in the individual's discerning process, as a guide for action based on the accumulated wisdom of past generations.

Authority is another much used—and sometimes abused—word. We know that in many different situations authority has slipped into authoritarianism: using power to impose directives from the top and to demand unquestioning obedience and observance. A more positive and proper role of authority is to inspire, encourage, sensitize and lead to growth. People look to such authority for guidance and direction.

Within the Catholic church, of course, authority has a special nature and function. As the early Christian community developed, so did the need for proper authority. The community grew as a result of preaching: The disciples who had experienced the risen Jesus began to tell the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, first in Jerusalem and then in other cities. Through this preaching, other people came to believe in Jesus. Communities gradually developed. The disciples moved on to new cities, leaving behind a local leader who presided at the liturgy and who was the primary teacher, faithfully yet creatively handing on the Good News.

Authority, then, plays an important and natural role in the Christian community. Through almost two thousand years of church history, many changes have occurred in the understanding and use of authority. We recognize not only the historical conditioning of these changes but also their strengths and weaknesses. In the contemporary Catholic church, authority continues to be discussed—and often misunderstood, especially regarding the topic of infallibility. Correcting these misunderstandings will lead us not only to an appropriate appreciation of authority but also to a better sense of the relationship between authority and conscience.

The Catholic church holds that the pope and the bishops in union with the pope enjoy teaching prerogatives of a unique kind. The pope and bishops are commissioned to teach authoritatively on faith and morals in a way no other teacher in the church can claim to do. Catholic teaching holds that the supreme doctrinal authority in the Roman Catholic church is all the bishops together

with and under the pope. In the contemporary church this teaching authority is called the *magisterium*. The guidance and pastoral concern of this teaching authority is a great gift to the church. Aided by the Holy Spirit, the magisterium helps protect the church from needless errors and wrong turns.

The word *magisterium* itself causes some confusion. Only in recent history has the word been so exclusively linked to the pope and other bishops. From the Latin word meaning “teacher,” *magisterium* has also been used to describe theologians and other teachers. Some people still wish to use the word that way today, although such use may contribute to the confusion. Another way to respect the various gifts and responsibilities of different groups (especially bishops and theologians) and at the same time to reduce confusion is simply to clarify the full meaning of *magisterium* when applied to the pope and other bishops. This clarification includes the precise consideration of these related topics: collegiality, infallibility, non-infallible teachings, the official teachers as learners and the relation to conscience.

COLLEGIALITY

In its discussion of church authority, Vatican II stressed that all the bishops (the college of bishops) share responsibility for the church, not just the pope. The pope, however, is head of this college. Therefore, even when he acts separately (that is, not specifically commissioned by the rest of the bishops), he acts as the visible head of the church—and indeed as head of the college of bishops. The concepts of “pope” and “college of bishops” are inseparable from each other. There is one supreme authority which can be expressed in two ways: (1) through a collegiate act (as in an ecumenical council, a worldwide gathering of bishops) or (2) through the act of the pope as head of the college (as in an encyclical letter).

Another distinction applies to these two expressions of the supreme teaching authority: the distinction between extraordinary and ordinary magisterium. The teaching authority is called “extraordinary” when it refers to a solemn act of defining a dogma of faith—that is, an infallible pronouncement of some truth as divinely revealed for the sake of our salvation. In this context, *define* means giving a definitive judgment on a particular question. Either an ecumenical council or a pope can exercise extraordinary teaching authority. The most recent example of such a pronouncement is the teaching about the Assumption of Mary, which was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

Any other exercise of the teaching authority of the bishops or the pope is called “ordinary.” Examples of this ordinary teaching authority include the teachings of a local bishop, the pastoral letters of the bishops’ conference, the encyclical letters of the popes and the documents of Vatican II (because the Council did not use its authority to define any new dogma of Catholic faith). Although these teachings are certainly authoritative, they do not as such fall under the category of infallible teaching.

At the risk of confusion—but actually for the sake of clarity—one more point must be made: The universal ordinary magisterium—that is, the teaching of all the bishops dispersed throughout the world with the pope—can proclaim doctrine infallibly. In other words, there can be cases of infallible teaching by ordinary magisterium. Examples of such teachings not solemnly defined but taught as divinely revealed include some of the basic articles of the Christian faith: for example, that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.

INFALLIBILITY

But what is infallibility? The heart of infallibility is this: The power of divine grace (not the human strength of its members) cannot allow the church as a whole to fall away from the truth of God. Simply put, the presence of God will not allow the church to self-destruct. Infallibility is a characteristic of the church, vested in those who have supreme authority over the whole church. As stated above, this supreme authority is the college of bishops with the pope as its head.

Infallibility, thus, is not a characteristic of the pope’s personal conduct or his private views. Even when Vatican I (1869–1870) defined papal infallibility, it did so in terms of the church. Vatican I stated that when the pope defines a dogma of faith (often described as speaking *ex cathedra*— “from the chair”) he is gifted by the Holy Spirit with that infallibility God desired for the church in defining a doctrine of faith or morals.

Vatican II reemphasized this point:

This infallibility, however, with which the divine redeemer wished to endow his church in defining doctrine pertaining to faith and morals, extends just as far as the deposit of reve-

lation, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded. The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful—who confirms his brothers and sisters in the faith (see Luke 22:32)—he proclaims in a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals....The infallibility promised to the church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter's successor, they exercise the supreme teaching office. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 25)

Infallibility does not mean that the church will never make mistakes. The church has certainly made its share: for example, in science, the Galileo case; in human rights, the practice of slavery. History reveals many other mistakes. Infallibility does mean that the church is not going to self-destruct because the presence of the Spirit at work in the community will prevent this. This conviction, of course, cannot be proved; it is a statement of faith. This conviction, rooted in the experience of the church and expressed in the Scriptures in Jesus' promise to be with his followers, is validated again and again throughout the centuries in the life of the Christian community. The presence and action of the Spirit will not allow the church as a whole to turn away from God!

Two modern councils—Vatican I and Vatican II—specified the conditions necessary for an expression of an infallible doctrinal pronouncement. Conditions for such a pronouncement are: (1) It must be a collegial act dealing with a revealed truth concerning faith or morals; (2) there must be an explicit call for absolute assent; (3) the pronouncement must be the unanimous teaching of all the bishops. Thus, infallibility means that the Holy Spirit so assists the magisterium that it solemnly obliges the faithful to believe only what is contained in God's word. Vatican II's *Constitution on Divine Revelation* describes the magisterium's role this way:

...[T]he task of giving an authentic interpretation of the word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This magisterium is not superior to the

word of God, but is rather its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it reverently and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed it draws from this sole deposit of faith. (10)

Infallibility guarantees the truth of the meaning of a statement, not the particular formulation of the meaning. As times and cultures change, particular words, concepts or theological viewpoints may need to change in order to express their central meaning. Given these severely limiting conditions for an infallible pronouncement, they are very rare. Indeed, in the twentieth century there was only one: the definition of Mary's Assumption (1950).

NON-INFALLIBLE TEACHINGS

What, then, is to be said about other official statements—such as the documents of Vatican II and papal encyclicals? Not too creatively, these documents are called non-infallible but authoritative teachings. They are not infallible declarations, yet they carry the weight of the magisterium. A proper understanding of non-infallible, authoritative teachings is absolutely essential for clarifying the confusion surrounding infallibility.

Non-infallible, authoritative teachings of the church are presumed to be true. This presumption is based on the faith-conviction that the Spirit is present in the magisterium, guiding it so that its teaching will be accurate. When an official teaching is given, the theoretically expected response of the Roman Catholic is: "This is a true teaching."

Still, non-infallible teachings do not require blind acceptance. To respond to such a teaching with the religious submission of will and of mind called for at Vatican II necessarily includes study, discussion, reflection and prayer. Such a response takes seriously the distinction between infallible and non-infallible teachings. Such a response also steers between two extremes: (1) an absolute, blind submission to authority (an approach which seems to say that the reasons for the teaching really do not matter) and (2) the rejection of any unique teaching prerogative on the part of the magisterium (an approach which judges the argument to be only as good as the reasons given). The proper response finds

a delicate blend of individual reflection and of acceptance of the authoritative role of the magisterium.

Such a response also acknowledges—and here is where caution is especially needed—the possibility of error. Non-infallible teachings can miss the mark, as Vatican II demonstrated in revising earlier teachings regarding religious freedom, for example. This is part of the distinction between infallible and non-infallible teachings. If the magisterium is carefully doing its preparation for such non-infallible teachings, however, then such occasions of error should be very rare. To sum up then, even in non-infallible yet authoritative teachings, the presupposition of truth is in favor of the teaching.

This is not to say that people may never genuinely question such non-infallible teachings. Such questioning occurred very publicly in the debate over artificial contraception. At other times, the debate has centered on the church's teaching about politics, economics and other social justice issues. For example, Paul VI's encyclical on the development of peoples was dismissed by some as warmed-over Marxism.

Not all of these controversies result merely from the casual rejection of the magisterium's authority. At the root of this debate and division, some scholars state, is an inconsistency in the way judgments about morality are made. Church teachings seem to be reached by using two different methods for making judgments. One way, the classicist or physicalist approach, emphasizes abstract principles, biology and the answers of tradition, and then stresses the need to obey these answers. Many of the teachings on sexuality and medical issues are arrived at by this method.

The second way, the modern or personalist method, is quite different. It starts with an understanding of the human being which is based on the key ideas and images of the Bible. It also emphasizes the need to be open to input from contemporary sciences and calls for personal and communal responsibility. Many of the social teachings are arrived at by this method. This method better embodies Vatican II's directive that all dimensions of well-being be included in judging the morality of human action.

A CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

In her 1989 John Courtney Murray Forum Lecture, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels names the situation of doubt and debate in the church a "crisis of plausibility."

She clearly articulates what many others have said and even more have experienced: that in the contemporary church there is a crisis of credibility. The crisis, she judges, is symbolized by the use of language because words are used to veil intentions rather than to disclose realities. Steinfels cites “collegiality” as an example, stating: “It is now used mostly by people who by their actions have just demonstrated that it doesn’t mean anything.”

The result is that some people cease to believe the official version of anything, but instead believe the opposite. Others end up believing nothing. Steinfels notes that:

Too often the language Catholics hear coming from the Vatican seems to have no real resonance in their lives. Too often our church leaders deftly avoid a whole range of realities that are deemed taboo or futile for discussion. Too often Catholics, lay and clergy, end by assuming the worst and seizing upon the very opposite of the official version. Or they fill up the hole left by their skepticism with new shibboleths.

Steinfels sees authority as one factor of this crisis of credibility. (The other two factors she describes are gender and the relationship of church and world.) Vatican II’s emphasis on collegiality and the priesthood of all the baptized led to new structures of authority and community. More traditional models were not abandoned, but synods, senates and councils appeared, all emphasizing collaboration and service.

Such an understanding and implementation of authority fit contemporary experience, in which one acquires authority through competence, commitment, character and courage. Steinfels names Dorothy Day, Karl Rahner and Oscar Romero as examples of people whose authority continues even after death. The more structured form of authority, acquired by virtue of role or office, of course also continued to exist.

Crisis emerges when the spirit of authority does not match changes in structure. As a result, Steinfels finds greater gaps between words and deeds. “National episcopal conferences are under attack. Bishops are sworn to hold a certain line. Calls are heard for uniformity and obedience....The principles of participation and subsidiarity notwithstanding, the pressures for centralization of authority in the church grow apace.” Authority is actually undermined rather