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Archbishop José H. Gomez

Good conscience and right decisions

Once I heard someone say seriously that the reason he wasn't Catholic was because, according to him, "to the church, everything that is pleasurable is a sin."

That isn't true. On the contrary, natural pleasurable things have been created by God, and therefore they are not sins in themselves.

But sin exists. And God has endowed man with the ability to distinguish naturally, in the heart of his being, what is good and what is evil, precisely in order to avoid falling into sin, which is real evil.

What is sin? The Compendium of the Catechism of the Church defines it very clearly: "It is an offense against God in disobedience to his love. It wounds human nature and injures human solidarity." (CC 392) Then sin is not a reality invented by the church, nor a set of rules written by men, but the breaking of the law established by God.

That is why Pope John Paul II wrote in his apostolic exhortation "Reconciliation and Penance" that "sin is above all a suicidal act," that is, it not only offends God, but it destroys man.

In his law, God has established fundamental principles, beginning with the right to life. Human life is sacred. And it is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death.

God has inscribed his law in the heart of the human being, and those fundamental principles of God's law are what we call "moral conscience."

What is moral conscience? The Compendium of the Catechism clearly defines this too: "Moral conscience, present in the heart of the person, is a judgment of reason which at the appropriate moment enjoins him to do good and to avoid evil. Thanks to moral conscience, the human person perceives the moral quality of an act to be done or which has already been done, permitting him to assume responsibility for the act. When attentive to moral conscience, the prudent person can hear the voice of God who speaks to him or her." (CC 372)

The defense of all stages of human life is not just "Catholic doctrine," but a human truth inscribed in the heart of men.

Today there are many Catholics who feel that they can support abortion, euthanasia, or other forms of attacks on the right to life or on the family as a natural institution between a man and a woman, claiming that they do so "according to their conscience."

Acting according to one's own conscience is no justification for acting against the law of God which, as we have seen, is a law written in our hearts for the good of the human person.

As the Compendium of the Catechism explains, "The dignity of the human person requires the uprightness of a moral conscience (which is to say that it be in accord with what is just and good according to reason and the law of God)." (CC 373)

In other words, it is not enough to act according to “one’s own conscience.” We must act with a conscience that is properly informed and formed through education in the faith, the assimilation of the Word of God and the teachings of the church. Jesus promised us that he would not leave us orphans, but would send us the advocate, “The Spirit of Truth” to guide us to all truth, so the process of formation of conscience ‘is supported by gifts of the Holy Spirit and helped by the advice of wise people.” (CC 374)

Traditionally the church teaches that to act correctly, not only as Christians, but as true human beings, we must follow three basic principles:

- 1) Never do evil to obtain good.
- 2) Always apply the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Mt 7:12)
- 3) Always respect your neighbor and his conscience, without accepting as good what is objectively evil.

At this time of the year, when our young people are getting ready to return to school and face the challenges of the modern world, often contrary to moral conscience, let us ask St. John Vianney, that extraordinary priest whose feast day we celebrate on Aug. 4, that following his example, all Catholics may have a good formed conscience to make good decisions, choosing good and avoiding evil.

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