



Catholic Conference
of Illinois

Election 2012 Election 2012

This is the second of four bulletin inserts to offer guidance and reflection points from Illinois' Catholic Bishops in preparation for the elections of November 6, 2012. (The first insert was an introduction to this effort.) A conscience formed by our Catholic faith is needed to bring our moral principles to the debate about issues and candidates. We feel compelled, here at the beginning, to clarify the definition of conscience, because some cite their conscience as a justification for immoral public policy positions or support for a candidate whose positions conflict with the common good.

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." [John 14:1-7]

"How can we know the way?" This is a question Christians have been asking since the beginning, and one that we must continue to ask today. Like St. Thomas, we know that we cannot find the truth by turning in upon ourselves. Rather we look to Christ and to His Church—for the Church is one with Christ.

To help us know the way, God has placed in each of us a CONSCIENCE, which "bears witness to the truth in reference to the Supreme Good."¹ In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey."² Conscience does not make us morally self-sufficient, but points us toward the truth for which we were made and which alone can make us free. [John 8:32]

Thus, while one must never knowingly act against the clear judgment of his or her own conscience, it is also true that a conscience can only act as a reliable moral guide when it is well-formed. With a spirit of humility and love we reaffirm the words of our brother bishops, reminding all the faithful that it is the "moral responsibility of each Catholic to hear, receive, and act upon the Church's teaching in the lifelong task of forming his or her own conscience."³

A well-formed conscience requires, first of all, a genuine desire to embrace goodness and truth and to avoid evil. For Catholics this begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth revealed to us in Sacred Scripture and Tradition.

Because sin and neglect can distort the judgment of our conscience, prayerful discernment—aided by the wisdom of the Church and the grace of the sacraments, especially reconciliation and the Eucharist—is necessary for a well-formed conscience. Catholics must understand that if they fail to form their consciences they can make erroneous moral judgments.

Conscience is more than a feeling or intuition; it is a judgment of reason whereby a person recognizes the moral quality of a specific, concrete act.⁴ Moral decision making requires the clearest possible understanding of the specific act being judged. In short, a well-formed conscience will be a well-*informed* conscience.

It is to that end that we offer these words of guidance, and to which we implore you to make every effort to learn the teachings of the Church and to form your conscience well.

In the next insert beginning on October 14th, we will discuss how a well-formed conscience and prudential judgment guide the decisions we make as citizens and voters. Additional information can be found on the Catholic Conference of Illinois website, www.ilcatholic.org, or in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) publication, Faithful Citizenship (www.faithfulcitizenship.org).

¹ CCC, 1777.

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 16

³ Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, 5

⁴ CCC, 1778