

Fr. Perozich comments —

Confusion in calling on conscience to justify sin abounds, even among bishops and cardinals.

This small primer is helpful in forming a correct conscience in order to see sin for what it is, to avoid it, and to do the good that God directs man to do in that secret core where man finds Himself alone with God who speaks to man at the right moment to say, “Do this, shun that.”

Just because a high ranking cleric uses worldly language to justify unbiblical behaviors does not mean I have to follow his teaching.

I need God to guide me through the church, but beyond some leaders who have perverted the concept of conscience by their use of secular language and their approval of sinful behaviors.

A Primer on Conscience

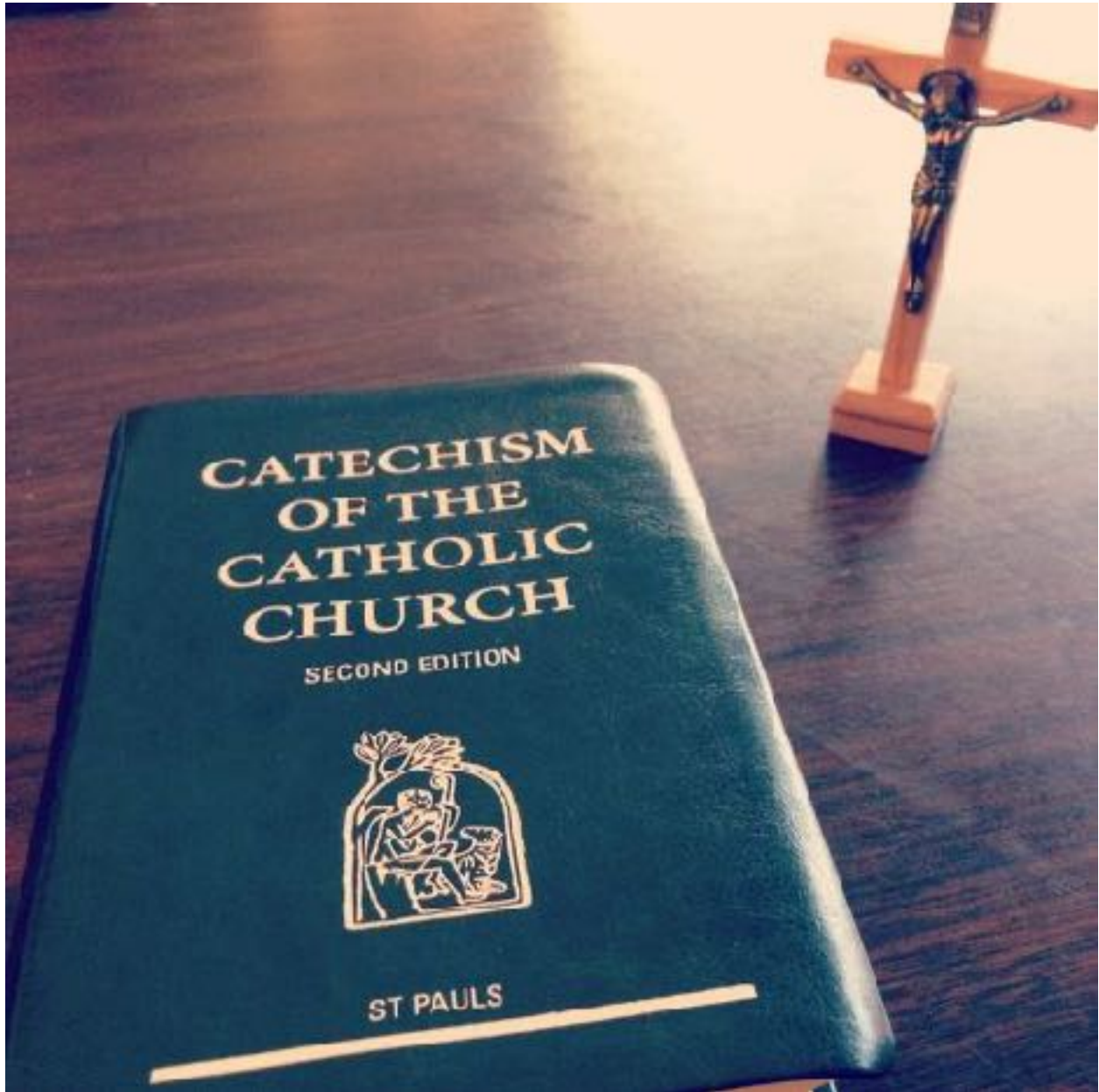
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by Joe Sixpack — The Every Catholic Guy • ChurchMilitant.com • March 25,

Is your conscience rightly formed?

Catholics have always been taught that we must follow our conscience. But an unfortunate reality of modern culture is that many Catholics today have a poorly [formed conscience](#). How well is your conscience formed? Well, let's find out.



Catechism of the Catholic Church

"Conscience," the Catechism of the Catholic Church [teaches](#), "is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing or has already completed."

In other words, as we previously learned about [natural law](#), your conscience is that small voice inside you that warns when something is wrong or tells you when something is right. When, after diligent reflection, we are morally certain something is the right thing to do, we must follow our conscience.

How Conscience Forms

Many people in the world today like to claim that conscience is a formation of thought based merely on a person's culture or religious belief system. This couldn't be further from the truth, as the principles of conscience are *not* of human origin.

Each human person has in his heart a law naturally inscribed by God. The [conscience](#) is the most secret inner core of man and is part of his soul's ability to know truth. We aren't aware of our conscience from the brain, a mere human organ, but from the movement of the soul. Neither a neurologist nor a scientist can tell us what part of the brain governs the conscience because, as an organ, the brain is incapable of judging the difference between good and evil.

We are solely responsible for all our actions before Almighty God because He gave us the gift of an intellect to know and a free will to choose the good. **We must use them for the purpose for which we were created; that is, to know, love, and serve God in this life so we can be forever happy with Him in the next.** To use the intellect and free will for anything contrary to God's law is an abuse of these gifts. In other words, using the mind and will to commit sin is itself sinful.

Four Types of Conscience

There are four kinds of conscience you or I might have formed: a correct conscience, a doubtful conscience, a scrupulous conscience and a lax conscience.

A [correct conscience](#), which is what we all should want, is one that conforms to the [natural law](#), the divine law and the Church's moral teachings. We form a right conscience by studying God's moral code as it's authoritatively taught by the Church (cf. [Luke 10:16](#)). By learning and understanding Christian morality, and with the aid we ask from the Holy Spirit, we can form a conscience that will lead us to sanctity and salvation.

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A [doubtful conscience](#) is one that cannot decide for or against the morality of an act. One must either refrain from acting or resolve the doubt. We may never act upon a doubtful conscience because it is a sin to do so. Don't yield to the temptation to be your own god.

A [scrupulous conscience](#) is one that is constantly in doubt. It's in dread of sin when none exists or in dread of mortal sin when the sin is only venial. The ordinary cure for a scrupulous conscience is obedience to a good and wise confessor. Absent such obedience, a person with a scrupulous conscience may eventually have to seek help from a competent mental health professional who understands the tenets of Catholicism.

A [lax conscience](#) is one that judges more by convenience than by God's law. The Catechism, in [paragraph 1791](#), tells us, "This is the case when a man 'takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded

through the habit of committing sin.' In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits."

Modern Moral Decay

In this day and age, we can't allow civil and penal laws to be the guide for our consciences. Until the middle of the 20th century, the laws of Western society could almost always be counted on to follow the moral norms of [natural law](#). This isn't any longer the case, as legalized abortion, bans on public display of faith and so-called same-sex marriage demonstrate. We are obliged to obey [only those laws that comport with God's law](#), and we are forbidden to obey laws contrary to His law, even under the threat of imprisonment or death. This follows St. Peter's [directive](#), "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

Another sign of modern moral decay is the erroneous notion that a good end justifies the use of evil means. A common example, which would be evident to anyone who watches police shows on television, is how police regularly tell lies to a suspect to get him to confess to a crime. No, it's not just Hollywood. This practice was affirmed by the Supreme Court some years ago. Lying is evil, and there is no such thing as a "white lie."

Another example that is often in the news these days is the use of torture. Both these practices rely on the premise that evil must be used to combat evil. We may never, however, commit evil hoping good may come from it. Indeed, we must be willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to keep God's law — even humiliation, ridicule and death. We should adopt the [motto of St. Dominic Savio](#): "Death before sin."

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Is it possible for a person to commit a morally wrong act without committing sin? Can a person do something that is objectively evil yet remain subjectively guiltless? Yes, it is, through what is called invincible ignorance. *[I contend that sin is committed but that the degree of guilt is diminished. — rp]* [Invincible ignorance](#) is a lack of knowledge for which a person is not morally responsible. A person may be ignorant owing to something that cannot possibly be known. The person is ignorant, therefore, through no fault of his own. The Catechism, in [paragraph 1793](#), however, affirms such ignorance "remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience."

Consider this week's article to be the end of your primer in Christian morality and conscience. Next week we'll start looking at the First Commandment: "I, the Lord, am your God. You shall have no gods besides me." There probably won't be too many surprises for you in that or the next two commandments, so they will go quickly.

As to the next seven, however, well, you're probably going to be very surprised by some of what you learn there. I know I was.