

[This chapter is from the book, *Premarital Sex and Love: In the Light of Human Experience and Following Jesus* by Paul Flaman. Copyright 1999 by Paul J. P. Flaman, St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada T6G 0B3. Any feedback you have can be emailed to: pflaman@ualberta.ca **Note:** This chapter has been published as an article with some minor modifications as: "Making Good Choices," *Journal of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars / Amicale de Savants Catholiques Canada*, Spring 2001, 2-15.]

CHAPTER 1: MAKING GOOD CHOICES

A. Human Fulfillment

We naturally tend to seek our fulfillment, what we think is good for us or will make us happy.¹ People generally want to have good and fulfilling relationships with some other people. This includes both nonmarital and marital relationships. With respect to the latter, consider, for example, the typical wedding card wish of happiness for the newly married couple. It does not take much experience of life and human relationships, however, to realize that not everyone is happy or deeply fulfilled. Many single, married and divorced people are unhappy in fact.

Not everything one has an urge to do, or wants or desires, is actually best. Many of us often have an urge to overeat or to eat what would be harmful to our health, a lonely thirteen year old girl may want to have a baby, a fourteen year old boy desiring to be accepted by some of his peers may illegally take drugs with them, and so forth. We often realize later that choices or decisions we made were really not good for us. Consider, for example, the young woman who becomes sexually active in her teens, has a series of sexual partners, later marries and wants to have children. She, however, discovers that she is infertile related to her having contracted

1. This is readily seen in people who are healthy in a holistic sense. Even those who behave in self-destructive ways, e.g., the alcoholic or one who attempts or commits suicide, however, are seeking what appears "good" to them in some sense. E.g., it may appear good to them to try to escape from a painful, unhappy life, temporarily or permanently. Such self-destructive behaviors of course are not really good or fulfilling for people. People in such circumstances often need the help of others (cf. Ch. 9, especially regarding the role of counselors).

chlamydia, a sexually transmitted disease, in one of her premarital sexual encounters.² Or, consider the man who has had many sexual "conquests" but now is dying of AIDS, and so on.

Morality is about making good, responsible choices, ones that will contribute to our happiness and fulfillment, not just for the moment or short term, but also in the long run. In our decisions and actions, it makes good sense to try to choose in ways that we will not later regret. With respect to serious decisions concerning the direction of one's life (e.g., a decision to marry or not), St. Ignatius of Loyola suggests, among other things, that one consider what "I would wish to have followed in making the present choice if I were at the moment of death."³ If a decision looks good from that point of view, it probably is a good one.

Morality and responsibility presuppose persons and their capacity of free choice. It does not make sense to speak of even quite intelligent animals such as chimpanzees and dolphins, or powerful computers, as having responsibility. Human beings who have reached a certain age and level of maturity are normally capable of moral responsibility. Exceptions would include the unconscious or severely mentally ill or handicapped. We, however, do not have control over and responsibility for everything. For example, none of us chose to be born male or female. A spontaneous miscarriage is not deliberately chosen and so is not a moral issue, whereas a procured abortion is.

2. Chlamydia, like gonorrhea, is a common sexually transmitted disease that may go undetected and "develop into pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in women and epididymitis in men, which in turn can lead to infertility...": The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Sex and America's Teenagers* (New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994), 38-39.

3. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1954), n. 186. St. Ignatius presents many good points with respect to making good choices including "Making a Choice of a Way of Life", nn. 169-89. Among other things, he suggests considering the advantages and disadvantages of a choice, one's motives, and the choice in the light of why God created one and God's plan of salvation.

Morality pertains to what we have voluntary control over, namely our free choices or deliberate actions, including internal ones such as deliberately wanting good for someone or wanting to please God. Voluntary premarital sexual relations are thus a moral issue. One, however, who has been forced to have sexual relations against one's will (cf. Ch. 8.C regarding sexual abuse) is not morally responsible for these, since they have happened beyond one's control. They are not something one has deliberately done.

Various ethicists consider the whole question of human fulfillment from various perspectives such as "in the light of human needs", "what is good for human beings", and "morally relevant values". For example, Benedict Ashley and Kevin O'Rourke discuss ethical values, human rights and responsibilities in the light of satisfying human needs (biological, psychological, social, spiritual and creative) in an integrated and consistent manner. They discuss human sexuality and sexual ethics in the light of a complex of values: "(a) physical pleasure; (b) the expression of intimate love; (c) the transmission of life to a new generation; (d) a paradigm and symbol of more universal forms of love."⁴ Germain Grisez, William May and some others discuss morality and integral human fulfillment in the light of various goods such as divine, human, sensible and instrumental. They treat sexual ethics in the light of such basic human goods as human life (including health and procreation), knowledge of truth, harmony within (including self-integration and authenticity), and harmony with others (including justice, friendship, marriage including marital friendship and fidelity, and friendship with God).⁵ With

4. See Benedict Ashley and Kevin O'Rourke, *Ethics of Health Care: An Introductory Textbook* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 129; cf. also Chs. 1 and 8. Leah Curtin and M. Josephine Flaherty, *Nursing Ethics: Theories and Pragmatics* (Bowie, MD: Brady Communications Co., Inc., 1982) also discuss ethics and human rights in the light of human needs.

5. See Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), Chs. 5 and 19 in particular, and *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, Illinois: Franciscan

respect to ethics, human sexuality, love and marriage, Dietrich von Hildebrand often speaks of the subjectively satisfying and morally relevant values such as the dignity of the human person, justice, self-giving and faithful love, truth, procreation, God, and so on.⁶

With regard to the question of human fulfillment, in closing this section, we can note here that the rest of this book implicitly treats this question in one way or another, especially as it pertains to our topics of premarital sex and love.

B. Forming a Correct Moral Conscience

Moral conscience as used here refers to a person's considered or best practical judgment as to what he or she should do or should not do in a given situation. In this sense, one speaks of following, that is, acting according to one's conscience or not.⁷ With respect to our topics, some

Press, 1993), Chs. 8 and 9; and Ronald Lawler, Joseph Boyle and William E. May, *Catholic Sexual Ethics* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1985).

6. See, e.g., Dietrich von Hildebrand's, *Christian Ethics* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1953), *Man and Woman* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965), and *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1984). Regarding basic questions of human fulfillment and ethics compare, e.g., also John Gallagher, *The Basis For Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

7. The word "conscience" is used in various declarations of human rights. E.g., the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion...", as cited in Ashley and O'Rourke (see note 4 above), 257. Various ethicists and moral theologians make a number of distinctions concerning conscience. E.g., conscience in a moral sense is not the same thing as superego, "the ego of another superimposed on our own to serve as an internal censor to regulate our conduct by using guilt as its powerful weapon": Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 124. For a few scholarly treatments of "moral conscience" see *ibid.*, Chs. 9-11; Grisez, Ch. 3, and Lawler, Boyle and May, Ch. 5 (see note 5 above); John Kippley, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (Cincinnati: The Couple to Couple League International, Inc., 1991), Chs. 5-7; and Thomas Pazhayampillal, S.D.B., *Pastoral Guide: Moral, Canonical, Liturgical* (Bangalore, India: Kristu Jyothi College, 1977), Ch. 4. For an overview of Catholic teaching on moral conscience, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], nn. 1776-1802.

examples of people called to make judgments of conscience include: a young single man or woman wondering whether he or she should have sex with his or her girlfriend or boyfriend; parents wondering how they can support their teenage daughter who has recently informed them that she is pregnant; a sex educator wondering whether he or she should advocate the use of condoms; and a Catholic doctor wondering whether he or she should give a prescription for the birth control pill to a young single woman who requests this. (Such issues will be addressed in Chapters 6-9 of this book.)

A person's judgment of conscience is not infallible, it can be either correct or erroneous. Ideally, our judgments of conscience should be correct, in line with what really is conducive to our true good or integral human fulfillment. For the person who believes God is omniscient and loves us, this corresponds to God's will for us, since God wants only what is really good or best for us. A person's conscience can be erroneous or mistaken by being either too lax or scrupulous. A "lax" conscience attempts to rationalize harmful or irresponsible behavior such as sexual promiscuity as being "good". An overly "scrupulous" conscience judges what is really according to integral fulfillment as wrong. For example, a wife who thinks it is wrong to enjoy having sexual intercourse with her husband, or a single person who thinks any thinking about sex is wrong. Both of these can be good, if done according to the requirements of a properly ordered or holistic love.

With respect to whether one should follow one's conscience or not, an important question is whether one's judgment is certain or doubtful. Regarding having a certain judgment of conscience, we can distinguish absolute and moral certainty. For instance, many people are absolutely certain that rape and murder are wrong. Christian spouses who believe the Bible is

inspired by God may be absolutely certain that they should never commit adultery. One may have absolute certainty about the morality of some behavior because all "good" people agree or because one believes God, who is infallible, has revealed this.

We can not expect to have absolute certainty about everything though. With respect to some of our decisions or judgments of conscience, "moral certainty", that is, beyond a reasonable doubt, is the most we can normally expect to have.⁸ For example, a man and a woman may be morally certain that they should marry each other. They know each other very well, both love each other deeply and sincerely want to marry each other, they feel at peace before God about this decision, and it is also the judgment of close friends and family, and their minister or priest, that they are both ready for marriage and good for each other (see also Ch. 8.E and F). Although they can not think of any solid reason (i.e. not an unfounded anxiety) why they should not marry, they are not absolutely certain the marriage will be a good one, because they have some understanding of human weakness and know the divorce statistics. One should always follow one's certain judgment of conscience, otherwise one would violate one's moral integrity.⁹

Having a "doubtful" conscience means that one does not have certainty beyond a reasonable doubt. Although one may be leaning towards judging in a certain way, one still has some real doubts, perhaps because one has not examined the issue thoroughly enough yet or one is aware of a non-superficial reason why what one is proposing to do may be wrong. For example, an engaged young woman's betrothed is trying to persuade her that having premarital

8. With respect to the phrase "reasonable doubt" compare the instructions to a jury to find the accused innocent, unless his or her guilt is proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

9. Cf. Grisez (see note 5 above), 76-8; and CCC, n. 1790.

sex would be a good way to express their love for each other. Part of her also feels this way, but her parents and her Church have instilled into her that sex should be reserved for marriage, according to God's wise plan.

Responsible ethicists conclude that one should not follow a doubtful conscience, but that one has an obligation to try to resolve the matter honestly. Consider the classic case of a hunter who hears something moving in the bush. He concludes that it is most likely a male deer because of the location and amount of movement. Since it is a remote area, it is unlikely that it is another human being. He is hunting to provide food for his family and it would be legal for him to kill a male deer. He, however, has not actually clearly seen what it is, and he realizes that there is a real possibility, even if slim, that it is a human being, perhaps another hunter. And yet, if he waits to verify what it is, the "deer" could get away. Would it be responsible or moral for the hunter to shoot to kill? John Kippley relates a real experience along these lines where if the other hunter had shot, he probably would not be here to write about it.¹⁰

This case illustrates our responsibility to resolve the doubt before acting (an exception might be an emergency situation where waiting probably would result in more harm or evil).¹¹ To choose to act in such circumstances would not involve goodwill, but a lack of care or even a willingness to harm or do evil. A hunter has a moral (also legal) responsibility to be certain of what he is shooting at before he shoots. The young woman, in the other example above, and

10. Cf. Kippley (see note 7 above), 93.

11. With respect to certitude and doubt in ethical decisions cf. *ibid.*, 92-97; Ashley and O'Rourke (see note 4 above), 62; and CCC, n. 1787, which says in part that, "Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law."

anyone else considering engaging in premarital sex for the first time or again, has a responsibility to examine seriously the morally relevant facts, values and norms (cf. section C below.)

With regard to forming a correct moral conscience, and whether one should follow one's conscience or not, the following teaching of the Second Vatican Council is also very relevant:

It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are 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. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth. (DH, 2 Flannery)

This text correctly speaks of our responsibility to seek and live according to the truth. This basically means seeking to live according to reality, that is, in a way that is really conducive to our integral fulfillment and God's will. With respect to the topics of premarital sex and love, this responsibility does not only fall on the shoulders of single people, the young and not so young. It is important that parents and others such as sex educators, counselors, health care professionals, theologians, writers, journalists, pastors and friends, in order to fulfill properly their roles, also try to form their own consciences correctly.

C. A Basic Human Responsibility

Trying to form one's conscience correctly is a basic responsibility of all human beings capable of moral responsibility, whether or not one is a Christian or Catholic. Especially when one is facing an ethical dilemma or decision, in order to form properly one's conscience, it is

necessary to try to become informed of the morally relevant facts, values and norms. Morally relevant facts include what alternatives are available to the person, including choosing "not to act" or to endure or welcome what happens rather than "doing" something. For example, a woman may choose to endure or welcome an unplanned pregnancy rather than have an abortion. Morally relevant facts also include any relevant circumstances, one's motives, and the kind of acts involved regarding various alternatives.¹²

Relevant circumstances include, among others: likely or possible consequences (cf. benefits and harms, not only physical ones, and risks such as regarding STDs; advantages and disadvantages, e.g., regarding remaining single or getting married); any legitimate laws (e.g. regarding reporting pedophilia) or professional obligations (e.g. those of a health care professional or teacher) that apply to the case; obligations that relate to one's role in the community (e.g. as a parent, a citizen, a neighbor); and personal obligations that one has assumed by a vow, legal contract or promise (e.g. a vow of celibacy or marriage).

Motives or intentions are reasons why a person acts or is inclined to act. Good motives include wanting good for oneself and others and wanting to please God. Improper motives such as seeking to hurt someone or rebel against God are not in line with a properly ordered love of God, others and oneself. Certain kinds of acts, regardless of circumstances, can not be ordered to loving God, others and oneself properly (e.g., various kinds of sexual abuse and murder).

12. Cf. Vat.II (Abbott), GS, n. 51, which says in part that morality "...does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts..."; Ashley and O'Rourke's (see note 4 above) *Principles of Well-Formed Conscience and Moral Discernment*, 37-39; and CCC, which says in part that, "The morality of human acts depends on: -the object chosen [cf. the kind of act]; -the end in view or the intention [cf. motives]; -the circumstances of the action."(n. 1750; nn. 1749-61 explain this more fully).

Some facts are morally relevant because they involve certain morally relevant values such as the life, health and dignity of human persons, friendship, truth, justice, love, fidelity, God, and so forth. For example, the facts that sexual relations can result in pregnancy or contracting an STD in certain circumstances are morally relevant because of the values of a new human life and health, among others, that are involved. A value is something that is important to us (cf. human needs) or good in itself (e.g. the life and dignity of a particular person is good in itself whether or not we appreciate this or "need" that person). A morally relevant value is important with regard to human fulfillment and choices.

A norm is a standard, principle, law or rule. Good moral norms or principles are meant to help us to appreciate, respect, protect, and promote certain morally relevant values properly. For example, the law against murder is meant to protect the value of life or the right to life of every human being; the professional standard or principle of free and informed consent is meant to protect and promote clients and/or their guardians' exercise of their rights with respect to the values of knowledge of truth and personal responsibility;¹³ the biblical commandment not to commit adultery is meant to protect and foster the values of marital friendship and fidelity; and so on. Good moral norms can serve to point out relevant values that we may tend to overlook because of lack of experience or prejudice. When we encounter a moral (or legal or professional) norm formulated by someone else, we should try to understand why it was formulated, what values it was meant to protect or promote. This can help us to overcome moral blindness as well as insensitive legalism, that is, following certain laws without understanding

13. Cf. Ashley and O'Rourke (see note 4 above), 38-39; and *Code of Ethics for Nursing* (Ottawa: Canadian Nurses Association, 1990), 14-15.

their purpose.¹⁴

With regard to becoming well-informed of morally relevant facts, values and norms, consulting with other people (in person, by reading or using other media) is often necessary. For example, knowledgeable health care professionals can inform one of facts relevant to one's health, also with respect to sexuality; good and wise friends, counselors, pastors and parents can often point out values related to an issue such as premarital sex that they have come to appreciate from their own experiences, hearing the experiences of others, reading, reflection and prayer; knowledgeable lawyers, ethicists and moral theologians can inform us of any relevant norms of the law, professional bodies, the Bible, the Church, and so on.

With regard to forming or educating one's conscience we should also note the role of good personal examples or models, good media resources, and socialization. Children, adolescents and adults often come to appreciate what is truly good and beautiful or valuable by being exposed to good examples or models of virtue. Virtues are good qualities of character such as fairness, kindness, compassion, honesty, gentleness, humility, fidelity, generosity, self-mastery, courage, wisdom, and so forth.¹⁵ We can encounter good models in some of the people we

14. In *Morality and Situation Ethics* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966), Dietrich and Alice von Hildebrand treat well the basic errors of situation ethics (regarding its failing to appreciate that certain morally relevant values are involved in many situations) and self-righteousness, as well as a proper understanding of law, including its letter and spirit, with respect to values and persons.

15. With respect to living a morally good life much has been written concerning the virtues. See, e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas' fairly comprehensive treatment in his *Summa Theologiae* [ST]; and CCC, 1803-1845. Narratives and historical works, including many parts of the Bible, often present not only good characters, but also bad characters or persons who embody certain vices as greed, selfishness, pride, laziness, dishonesty, infidelity, vindictiveness and so on, as well as characters or persons who are a mix of some good and bad qualities. Good narrative and historical works often present a development and/or conversion in the characters or persons. This can all be edifying if presented appropriately and the reader, listener and/or viewer comes

encounter in our lives, such as good and wise friends, parents, teachers and pastors, or in good media resources such as good documentaries, movies, plays, and literature including good biographies, historical works, poetry and narrative. Compare, for example, the biblical narratives (also some good movies) of Jesus and other holy biblical personages; good documentaries and books about remarkable people such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jean Vanier and Mother Teresa of Calcutta; good literature such as the works of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky; good books and movies for children, adolescents and adults; and so on.

Good models, including those presented in good narrative, can influence for the good not only our intellect or reasoning powers, but also our imagination and emotions. With regard to this, consider the following experience a young woman shared with me. She became pregnant while single and attending school. She considered her options of having an abortion or continuing with the pregnancy and raising the child herself or giving it up for adoption. What influenced her not to have the abortion and to give the baby up for adoption was the story of two women and King Solomon reported in 1 Kg 3:16-28. The two women each claim that a newborn child is theirs. King Solomon orders that the child be cut in two, giving half to one and half to the other. The true mother of the child offers to give the child to the other rather than having it killed, whereas the other woman would rather see it dead. This narrative had an impact on the young woman, who shared with me, at more than the rational level.

Good living personal examples, narrative and historical works, can also help us to appreciate that morality is not only about making good choices, doing good actions and avoiding

to appreciate better genuine values and virtues.

immoral or harmful ones. Morality is primarily about becoming good or virtuous persons. Good, loving persons tend to make good, loving choices, to do good and avoid evil, connaturally.¹⁶ Conversely, by making good, loving choices and by doing good actions from the heart, we tend to form ourselves into better persons.

Good socialization is also extremely important with respect to the education or formation of conscience. If children, from the earliest years, learn in the family and elsewhere to love themselves, others, the environment and God in an ordered way, and always to treat others with respect and fairness such values will likely influence them for the rest of their lives. The education of conscience, however, is not only for children and adolescents. It is a lifelong task. Adults, too, need to continue to form their consciences, especially when faced with moral dilemmas and controversy.

Trying to have a realistic knowledge and understanding of oneself in relationship to others and God is also very important with respect to forming one's conscience. None of us has been socialized perfectly and none of us is perfect. We all have a tendency to rationalize what we want, which is not always what is best for ourselves and others.

It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of *interiority* is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection...¹⁷

Concerning self-examination, we should try to know well our strengths, weaknesses, limitations including our limited knowledge and experience, temperament, character, prejudices, cultural

16. Gula (see note 7 above), 138-46, presents a number of good insights with respect to conscience, character, vision, imagination and stories.

17. CCC, n. 1779.

and educational biases, and so forth. What alternatives one will think of in a situation, what values one will perceive and consider important, and what norms one will consider obligatory, are very much related to one's character and vision, including their limits. Thus the better one understands oneself in relation to others and God, the better one's judgments of conscience are likely to be. With respect to this, prayer, personal communion with God, is vital for all of us, to expand and enlighten our vision of reality and to see persons, things and events in proper perspective.

D. A Christian Perspective

...the formation of conscience in a person who simply believes in God will be different from the formation of conscience in a man who accepts that God did intervene in history and did send us a Savior in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ who as our Brother was to rehabilitate mankind, give it a new life and lay down for us certain revealed principles showing the way in which God expects us to act (cf. Jn 3:16; 8:12).¹⁸

A believing Christian does not see it as unreasonable to hold that God, motivated by love, has chosen to reveal himself and his plan to us in various ways, and most fully and definitively in his Son, Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 1:1-2). With regard to divine revelation and the human response of faith, compare the analogy of self-disclosure and faith in interpersonal human relationships. We can only know other persons in a personal way if they reveal or communicate who they are, including their thoughts, feelings and intentions, by their words and actions. For example, if someone loves us, we cannot discover or prove this by empirical scientific methods.

18. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Statement on the Formation of Conscience* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1974), n. 10.

The person needs to tell us and/or demonstrate this by his or her actions. If we accept this, it involves a certain measure of trust or faith. In human relationships, a person's words can be either confirmed or undermined by his or her actions. Kind and considerate actions, for example, support, whereas unkind and inconsiderate actions undermine claims of love.

There exist many claims, including some contradictory claims, of divine revelation. For the believing Christian, the claim that Jesus is not only a good man and wise teacher, but also God incarnate, infinite Love and Truth in human form (cf. Jn 1:1-18 and 13-17), is confirmed by several things: Jesus himself, including the integrity of his life, the content of his message, and his noble death; the integrity of the apostolic witness in the New Testament including teaching the highest moral standards; the lives of many Christian saints and the noble deaths of many Christian martyrs; and actions of God including the miracles and resurrection of Jesus, and the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of people who are open to God, sincerely seek to please him, and invite him into their lives. Christian faith does not contradict human experience and reason but enlightens them.

With respect to forming one's conscience, for the believing Christian, Jesus embodies all divine and human goodness. Coming to know Jesus better, thus helps one to better appreciate morally relevant goods and values. Jesus, including who he is as true God and true man, his life, message and Holy Spirit, is the norm of norms.¹⁹ Jesus taught that all the law and the prophets hang on the two commandments of loving God with all one's heart, soul and mind, and loving one's neighbor as oneself (cf. Mt 22:34-40). To paraphrase, we could say that the requirements of morality, including other specific moral teachings of Jesus, are all related to loving God,

19. Cf. CCC, p. 50 (the Nicene Creed), and nn. 422-83; and Paul Quay, *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality* (Evanston, IL: Credo House Books, 1985), 9-10.

others and oneself in a properly ordered or holistic way. Jesus not only reveals to us who God truly is, but who we are and are meant to become, and what is required for integral fulfillment.²⁰

In sincerely seeking in humility to form our consciences correctly and to live according to the truth, we will often realize that we have been mistaken and failed to love God, others, ourselves and the rest of creation as we ought. In realizing this, it is important not to become depressed or enslaved by unhealthy guilt, but to confess our sins, accept God's forgiveness and healing (cf. 1 Jn 1:8-9), and move ahead and grow with God's help or grace. Human beings grow and develop not only biologically and psychologically, but also morally and spiritually. The moral life thus involves, indeed should involve, moral progress.²¹ (With respect to this, Ch. 9.B below speaks of adapting counseling and education including sex education to those to be counseled and educated).

The following true story is an illustration that the Christian life and moral teaching, properly understood, is not a matter of laying guilt trips on people but truly liberating and empowering. A few years ago my wife and I attended a concert by Silverwind, a talented Christian music group who have performed before hundreds of thousands of people. During one of the breaks between songs, one of the female singers shared the following experience. As a teenager she had become

20. Cf. the Second Vatican Council, GS, n. 22.

21. The human person, "who has been called to live God's wise and loving design in a responsible manner, is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth." This, however, "cannot be identified with 'gradualness of the law', as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations. In God's plan, all ... are called ... to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God's command with serene confidence in God's grace and in his or her own will.": Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1981), n. 34.

involved with drugs. Then, to support her drug habit she became involved in prostitution. She became pregnant and had an abortion. After all this, she was feeling very dejected and depressed. Fortunately, through experiencing the love of some committed Christians and the love of God, she was able to accept God's forgiveness and forgive herself. She shared this experience as an act of love, hoping to help others who may be without hope concerning their mistakes and sins, and the possibility of turning their lives around.

Disciples or followers of Jesus will find much help in forming their consciences by trying to understand the values underlying the teaching of Jesus. Consider, for example, a young man's encounter with Jesus (Mt 19:16-22) and Jesus' teaching on the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). Jesus tells the young man, "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." When asked, "Which ones?", Jesus cites a few of the Ten Commandments and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."²² Whether God's commandments are expressed in a negative form (i.e. "You shall not" murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness...) or in a positive form (i.e. honor your parents, love your neighbor...), they call us to respect, protect and promote such values as human life, marital fidelity, justice, truth, and the dignity of people including those to whom one owes one's life. In the parable of the Last Judgment Jesus identifies himself with "the least", those in need of food, something to drink, hospitality, clothing, and other forms of care. The great value of every human being, as well as the value of what we need to meet our bodily and other human needs and the value of responding to these, is underscored. Just from these two teachings of Jesus, we can appreciate that the love Jesus talked about is very real. It

22. Pope John Paul II provides a fairly extensive commentary on this passage (Mt 19:16-22) in his encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993), Ch. 1.

means responding in concrete ways to real human needs and respecting fundamental values.

Christians can encounter, in their daily lives, moral issues and dilemmas that are not specifically dealt with in the reported teaching of Jesus or elsewhere in the Bible. Having a good appreciation of the values that underlie biblical norms and narratives, even though they were originally written centuries ago, can help us to make good decisions today. Many of the values underlying biblical norms and narratives are universal, that is, they are related to the supreme goodness of God, the goodness of human beings created in God's image, and the goodness of the rest of God's creation (cf. Mk 10:18 and Gen 1).²³ Such values as God, human life, the dignity of persons, truth, justice, self-giving and faithful love, marriage, procreation, and so on, are still relevant for our fulfillment today. They are involved in all kinds of contemporary situations and issues. This includes issues such as sex education, birth control methods, and premarital sexual petting, that are not specifically named in the Bible.

Prayer is also vital for the Christian formation of conscience. With respect to this, consider, among many other New Testament teachings, the following: to discern God's will, what is good and acceptable, it is necessary to have one's mind renewed, to have the mind of Christ (see Rm 12:2; 1 Cor 2:16; and Phil 1:9-11); that God will give us wisdom if we sincerely ask him (see Jam 1:5-8); and that God will give us the Holy Spirit, who will lead us into the complete truth and who pours the love of God into our hearts (see Jn 16:12-15; and Rm 5:5), if we but ask (see

23. It should be noted that, from a Christian perspective, although some of the biblical norms are expressions of God's universal moral law such as the Ten Commandments (cf. Ex 20) and Jesus' new commandment (cf. Jn 13:34-35), not all of them are. Some of them are not universal such as the Jewish circumcision and dietary laws (cf. Ac 15), or related to custom such as the apostle Paul's exhortation that women should wear veils in Church (cf. 1 Cor 11:2-16). Ch. 2 of this book treats biblical perspectives on sex, marriage and love (i.e. of relevance to our topics of premarital sex and love), taking into account what some of the better biblical scholarship says about the historical and cultural situations of the biblical authors.

Lk 11:13). Genuine prayer, involving intimate dialogue and communion with the living God, enables us to build a deep personal relationship with God. It helps us to see ourselves, our relationships, our successes and problems, our choices and decisions, and everything else, in proper perspective, in the light of God's infinite and eternal love.²⁴

E. A Catholic Perspective

A Catholic perspective on the formation of conscience is first of all fully human and Christian. Therefore, everything said above regarding the formation of conscience as a basic human responsibility and from a Christian perspective applies to Catholics too. Moreover, the Catholic Church has a number of resources that can be most helpful, both for Catholics and non-Catholics, in forming their consciences correctly.

With respect to human experience, it is perhaps first of all appropriate to refer to the lives of the many holy men and women, whether canonized saints or not, who have embodied Christian values and virtues to a remarkable degree. Down through the centuries they have faced many of the same basic human moral dilemmas and problems that we face today, including those with respect to human sexuality, marriage and love. Consider, for example, Joseph and Mary, the parents of Jesus, and other holy men and women of the Bible; Christian saints such as John Chrysostom, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, Ignatius of Loyola, John Bosco, Theresa of Lisieux, and Maximilian Kolbe; as well as the many "saints", not formally recognized as such, whom the Church remembers on All Saints Day, November 1st. With regard to human sexuality, unmarried saints such as Agnes, Augustine

24. CCC, Part IV, gives an excellent overview of Christian prayer and refers to some other excellent sources.

of Hippo,²⁵ Aloysius Gonzaga, Rose of Lima, Joan of Arc and Maria Goretti, as well as married saints such as Joseph and Mary, Joachim and Anne, the parents of Mary, Augustine's mother Monica, Louis IX of France, Elizabeth of Hungary, Margaret of Scotland, and Thomas Moore, can help us to appreciate the beauty and grandeur of the virtue of chastity, including marital chastity which is not equivalent to celibacy, and the value of purity. Many of the saints have also written inspired works on the Christian life. There exist both scholarly and critical editions of the lives and writings of the saints for adults, as well as books and movies for children.²⁶

Another important resource with respect to the formation or education of conscience is official Catholic teaching. According to Christian faith Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to lead his disciples into the complete truth (see, e.g., Jn 14-16). With respect to this, the Catholic Church holds that the pope and bishops in union with him, as legitimate successors of Peter and the other apostles chosen by Jesus, are called to carry on their role in the Church. Part of their responsibility includes discerning and teaching with regard to matters of faith and morals. The Second Vatican Council teaches that God gives the pope and bishops certain gifts or graces, including a charism of truth, to fulfill their responsibilities (see LG, Ch. III). It makes sense that God who loves us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to die for our salvation, would also provide a means for us to know clearly what is important with respect to our salvation.

Others have presented developed treatments of conscience in relation to Catholic teaching,

25. St. Augustine of Hippo's writings and life have been very influential. The fact that some of his writings on sexuality are controversial and that Catholic teaching has implicitly corrected certain points should not lead us to dismiss this great saint. He experienced a remarkable conversion to the love of God and has written for the most part very beautifully about many issues including sex, marriage and love. Ch. 3 below treats some aspects of his life and writings that are relevant to our topics.

26. Consult, for example, good Catholic bookstores, libraries and other resource centers.

also with respect to certain sexual issues.²⁷ Although, I, as a believing Catholic Christian, personally accept Catholic teaching properly understood, the emphasis in this book will be on the values expressed or implied in the relevant teaching. Having a good appreciation of morally relevant values, as discussed in section C above, is important for anyone in forming one's conscience, whether one is a Catholic or Christian or not. In this regard considering not only the norms, principles and reasons given in Catholic teaching, which should not be minimized, but also the values that these are meant to help protect and promote, can be very helpful for anyone.

Along these lines, the Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops points out that:

[the magisterium is a "teaching service of the Church" and must not] be considered as some sort of inhibition or limiting force. It would be wrong to think that the persons most free are those who do not believe at all and that we go in a descending scale of freedom till we meet the Catholic. We believe that the reverse is true. We believe that knowing what God has established for the fulfillment of man is a freeing principle, not a principle of enslavement. The more we know about God's will for us, the more fulfilled we are, the surer we are that we will not destroy ourselves and wander into paths which will not enhance our liberty but take it away entirely. "The truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:32...).²⁸

Besides the saints and Catholic teaching, one can also find many other resources in the Catholic Church with respect to trying to form a correct conscience or seeking to live according to the truth. These include other moral and spiritual helps or means of grace such as personal prayer, the example, encouragement and sharing of others who are trying to follow Jesus in a faithful and mature way, the Bible and other good spiritual and theological reading, the liturgy

27. See, e.g., Lawler, Boyle and May (see note 5 above), Ch. 5, as well as the many sources referred to in their notes.

28. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (see note 18 above), nn. 11 and 12.

including the Mass, the sacraments, and so forth.²⁹

With respect to the above, we can consider the following interesting story that Pope John Paul I, who was pope for only thirty-three days, told:

A certain English preacher MacNabb speaking at Hyde Park spoke of the Church. When he finished someone asked to speak and said: your words are beautiful. But I know several Catholic priests, who have not been with the poor and made themselves rich. I know also some Catholic husbands who have been unfaithful to their wives. This Church made of sinners does not please me. The Father said: You have a little reason, but may I make an objection? Excuse me, but am I mistaken or is the collar of your shirt a little dirty? - Yes, I know. - But is it dirty because you have not used soap, or you have used soap and it was of no use? No, he said, I did not use soap. - There you have it. The Catholic Church also has some extraordinary soap: the Gospel read and lived; the sacraments celebrated in the proper manner; prayer well used would be a marvelous soap capable of making all of us saints. We are not all saints, because we have not all used this soap enough.³⁰

Although this story makes a very valid point, it should be noted that the Catholic Church does not have a monopoly on the truth or the Holy Spirit. God wants the salvation of all human beings (see 1 Tm 2:3-4) and so certain means of his grace are found among non-Catholics as well. With respect to ecumenism and cooperating with others, the Second Vatican Council teaches, among many other things, that:

29. CCC (see its table of contents and subject index) treats many of these such as sacred scripture, the liturgy, sacraments and prayer, and refers to some other good sources concerning these.

30. From Pope John Paul I's General Audience on "Faith", 13 September 1978, *Giovanni Paolo I: Angelus, Omelie, Udienze nei 33 Giorni di Pontificato* (Rome: Editrice La Parola, 1978), 17. The translation from the Italian is mine.

...Catholics must joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren [i.e. Christians of other denominations]. It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ....

...whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification.(UR, n. 4)

...Christians are joined with the rest of men [and women] in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships.(GS, n. 16)

In closing this chapter on "Making Good Choices", I would like to note that this whole book is intended as a resource with respect to the education or formation of people's consciences, especially with respect to premarital sex and related issues such as sex education. It is my hope and prayer that this book will help others, whether Catholic or not, whether single or married, whether parents, sex educators, teachers, healthcare or other professionals, pastors or theologians..., to be better informed and to fulfill better their respective responsibilities in these areas.