

Week 1: Forming your Conscience

MAIN POINTS

1. Conscience is an inner voice in the depths of our soul rooted in God's law. It judges right or wrong in situations and points us toward what is good.
2. We are obligated to follow the judgment of our conscience and form our conscience through prayer, God's Word, and the teachings of the Church.
3. A well-formed conscience helps us choose what is ultimately good for us and avoid what will lead to harm and disappointment.

KEY TERMS

1. **Attentiveness** – Paying close attention to God's presence and promptings so you can make choices guided by his will. (CCC 1776)
2. **Conscience** - The voice of God in our souls that urges us to do good and reject evil. (CCC 1777)

READING

Parents: the following should be read together with you and your teen.

Main Point 1:

Conscience is an inner voice in the depths of our soul rooted in God's law. It judges right or wrong in situations and points us toward what is good.

- It seems like over the years, people have become more and more concerned about what is in their food, and rightly so. We know some foods are good for us and will benefit our health. We also know that in order to be mass-produced, have a maximum shelf life, and appeal to a wide range of tastes, some foods have ingredients that aren't great for us.
- It's not always easy to know what's good for us and what isn't. That's where apps like Yuka and other food scanners come in handy. A quick scan can tell us whether a product is well-made and contains wholesome ingredients or if it's better left on the shelf.
- That quick guidance telling you, "This is good and will help you" or, "This is bad and will not" is a lot like the built-in scanner we have for moral decisions — our conscience.
- It can feel confusing to figure out what's right or wrong sometimes, especially when your friends or social media say so many different things. However, most of the time, you really do know deep down when something's off.

- Read the following from the Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 1776: *“Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.”*

That voice in the depths of your soul is your conscience. It isn’t just a random feeling that changes with your mood. It’s actually imprinted in our soul by God’s law, giving us a sense of right and wrong. (CCC 1777)

Our conscience is like the referee of our soul. When we do something wrong, it throws the flag to show us that what we did was wrong and needs to be addressed.

Parents and teens: At this time, share with each other a quick memory of being convicted by your conscience, even if no one else said a word.

- When we sin, it’s a serious matter. God gives us a conscience to help keep us on the right track. Like a referee monitors the integrity of the game or a food-scanning app helps ensure what you are eating is good for you, our conscience guides us to make choices that will lead us to thrive.

- For this reason, our conscience sometimes makes us feel bad. Because sin is an issue, we need to know when we’ve done something wrong. Feelings of guilt or shame accompany sinful actions as indicators that what we did (or didn’t do) wasn’t good for us or others, and needs to be forgiven and fixed.

- At the same time, conscience also affirms our good behaviors. Think of a time when you did something you knew was right, like deciding not to cheat on a test when you had the chance, refusing to respond in anger to someone who insulted you, or helping a friend or stranger in need. In situations like these, conscience rewards us with a deep feeling of satisfaction. (CCC 1778, 1781)

- Whether it’s for small choices or bigger moral dilemmas, this built-in “referee” helps you stay within bounds when everyone else around you might be lost in the game.

Main Point 2: We are obligated to follow the judgment of our conscience and form our conscience through prayer, God’s Word, and the teachings of the Church.

Our conscience reveals what we believe to be right in a given situation. For this reason, we are morally obligated to follow our conscience. If we don’t follow it, we are choosing against what we believe is the right thing to do. (CCC 1790)

- However, there are a few obstacles we face when we try to follow our conscience.
- First, we might not be paying enough attention to our conscience.
- Our world is full of busyness and distractions. In the midst of everything going on in life, the voice of conscience can easily be drowned out. In order to respond to our consciences, we have to take time to listen to them. (CCC 1779)
- Take a moment to think about what helps you connect with that inner voice; maybe it's prayer, journaling, or just sitting quietly outside.

Take a moment to close your eyes and just breathe for a few seconds of silence.

- Even if you're not used to being that quiet, notice how your mind settles. That interior calm can reveal clarity about the choices you make. A few minutes of silence each day can help you hear that voice more clearly. It's in this stillness that you notice God's guidance within rather than just your immediate wants.
- If we want to be serious about listening to our conscience, we need to carve out time for interiority and silence. For many of us, this means we need to set aside time to "power off" distractions to "tune into" God's gentle nudge. Without self-awareness and time spent in reflection, we'll have a hard time hearing and following our conscience.
- Another obstacle we face in following our conscience is that our conscience doesn't always make the right judgment. Sometimes, we're just wrong. (CCC 1786)
- As humans, we are far from perfect. Sometimes, what we believe to be right in a given situation is influenced by our own emotions or wants, or we're blind to the truth because of our ignorance. In this case, we need help in deciding what's best. This is why it's essential that we form our conscience. (CCC 1783)

At this time open your bible to Psalm 119: 105 and read it.

Forming our conscience means that we take time to listen to what God and the Church have to say about situations. Every time you read God's Word or listen to Church teachings, you're calibrating your internal "referee." (CCC 1785)

- Similar to a coach correcting a player's posture or technique, our consciences need correction. Immersing ourselves in God's commands and desires found in his Word and the teaching of the Church corrects our conscience so that it can really see what's best in a given situation.
- Forming your conscience isn't automatic; it takes commitment to daily prayer, reading Scripture, and openness to the Church's guidance.

- When you hear the Church say something is harmful, it's good to trust that collective wisdom rather than leaving it up to guesswork.

Parents and teens: Share together a short story of a personal moment when advice from a friend or mentor helped clear up confusion about a tough decision.

- Even if we hear our conscience and know that it's telling us the right thing to do, we might not follow our conscience because of what it costs. This is the third difficulty we face.

We often want to follow the inner nudge of conscience, but at times, the cost seems high. It's easy to think, "I don't want to do that," and label it conscience, but that's really just preference. Real conscience points you toward genuine good, even when it might be inconvenient. Take a moment to encourage the teens to reflect on a recent situation in which they knew the right choice but hesitated.

Afterward, open your bible and read 2 Timothy 1:7.

- God has given us a spirit of power to be able to face tough situations. However, like training for a sport, you have to put in the effort if you want strong "moral muscles" that can handle any challenge. (CCC 1784)
- Following our conscience can be hard and costly, but it's worth it. The peace we experience knowing that we are doing what God wants and holding fast to our convictions far outweighs the momentary ease of caving into worldly pressures or desires.

Main Point 3: A well-formed conscience helps us choose what is ultimately good for us and avoid what will lead to harm and disappointment.

Saint Thomas More is a prime example of someone who lived out the obligation to follow conscience, no matter the consequences.

- He spent years serving as a statesman in England and eventually reached the rank of Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII. He fulfilled the role faithfully for years.
- Sir Thomas eventually found himself caught in the middle of a dispute between the King of England and the pope. Knowing the king's actions were wrong, he resigned from his position. He did not break any laws or speak out publicly against the king. He simply followed his conscience.
- Eventually, he was forced to either sign an act affirming King Henry's actions or be tried as a traitor. He refused to give in. He went to prison and was visited by friends and family imploring him to change his mind. More, however, could not abandon his conscience. He was tried and executed.

- He lost his high-ranking position and eventually his life, yet he never surrendered his moral compass. That might sound extreme, but it reminds us that loyalty to conscience is more valuable than popularity, power, or comfort.

- Following conscience offers more than a momentary buzz; it sets us on a path that leads toward authentic freedom and inner peace. There's a deep sense of relief we experience whenever we choose something that aligns with what we believe as Catholics.

A well-formed conscience protects us from chasing decisions that look fun now but could disappoint us later. When you think about a time you went against your conscience — maybe you spread a rumor or stayed silent when you saw someone being bullied — you realize that what seemed good or easy at the moment often leaves a bitter taste in the end.

- Those uncomfortable feelings aren't meant to make you feel bad about yourself. They are a warning that you are stepping onto shaky ground. (CCC 1781)

Parents: take time to identify with your teen a current situation in which they sense their conscience nudging them. After they share, affirm that God's mercy meets them right there.

When your moral sense is properly trained, it acts like a trustworthy GPS pointing you away from temporary thrills that usually cause regret.

- We can get tricked into believing popularity or shortcuts will fulfill us, but a solid conscience reminds us that true satisfaction comes from choosing what God desires.

- This doesn't mean we won't ever be tempted or confused. Forming your conscience is an ongoing adventure, and you'll definitely have moments where you'd rather ignore the whistle blowing in your soul. Yet the payoff is a life guided by confidence, integrity, and deeper joy.

- By building quiet time into your routine — maybe five minutes of silent prayer or journaling — you allow the Holy Spirit to speak more clearly. (CCC 1785)

- That regular pause can help you steer away from choices that harm your relationships or your selfworth. • The more you practice following your conscience, the more it becomes second nature, alerting you before you drift off course.

- Over time, your conscience will guide you steadily toward God's vision for your life, sparing you unnecessary hurt and giving you the freedom to love and serve boldly.

Reflection Questions for your teen to answer. *If your teen types their responses, please print out so they can be collected and turned in.*

The following real-life situations connect with how saints formed and followed their consciences. Begin by reading the scenario. After reading the brief story of a relevant saintly example. Answer the prompts that follow each saint's story.

Exercise 1

Scenario: *Your friends ask you to do something that goes against your beliefs. You feel immense pressure to cave in, but your conscience is telling you not to. What do you do?*

Saintly Example

Saint Thomas More was a brilliant lawyer and adviser to King Henry VIII who refused to back down when the king and other government officials demanded he deny Catholic teachings. He ended up losing his high status and even his life because he would not betray his conscience. His courage shows us that doing what is right might be costly, but it is more valuable than the world's approval. He inspires us to stand up for our beliefs, no matter how much pressure we face from others.

Questions for you to answer:

- Why do you think St. Thomas More was willing to sacrifice everything instead of compromising his faith?
- How do you respond when friends ask you to do something that goes against your beliefs?

Exercise 2 Scenario You sense God asking you to do or say something that could make you stand out from others. This nudge from the Holy Spirit won't go away, but you're afraid to act. How do you respond?

Saintly Example

Saint Joan of Arc was a teenage girl in France who, against all odds, led her country's armies to key victories during the Hundred Years' War. She claimed her direction came from visions and voices from saints, but many people thought she was crazy or making it all up. Despite being mocked and eventually captured by her enemies, she stayed true to her conscience and remained faithful to God's guidance. Her story reminds us that God can work powerfully through young people who aren't afraid to trust him.

Discussion Questions

- *What do you think made St. Joan of Arc so steadfast despite the challenges she faced?*

- *When have you felt called to stand up for something, even though others might have mocked you? What makes it hard to do this?*

Exercise 3

Scenario

Some of your friends are acting disrespectfully at Mass, using God's name in vain, or joking about your faith or religious things in a way they shouldn't. You know this is wrong, and you debate saying something. What's your move?

Saintly Example

Saint Tarcisus was a young altar server in ancient Rome who bravely carried the Holy Eucharist to persecuted Christians. When a group of non-believers confronted him and demanded he hand over the Eucharist, he refused and ultimately died protecting it. His short life reveals the depth of respect we should have for sacred things and the courage it takes to live out our faith. Tarcisus challenges us to guard what's holy with the same commitment he showed.

Discussion Questions

- Saint Tarcisus had a deep devotion to the Eucharist and it showed in how he acted. How can he inspire us?
- What are you willing to endure to protect what you hold sacred?

Exercise 4

Scenario

You know you struggle with temptations when you put yourself in certain situations, like being alone in your room with your phone or hanging out with a certain group of people. You feel your conscience prodding you to avoid these circumstances. What's your response?

Saintly Example

Saint Benedict is often called the Father of Western Monasticism because he started communities of monks and wrote guidelines on how they could live faithfully. He was so determined to stay pure and resist sin that, at one point, he threw himself into thorn bushes to fight temptation. Although we may not need to dive into thorns, his example shows that sometimes we have to take drastic steps to protect our souls. His life teaches us the importance of self-control and seeking God above all else.

Discussion Questions to answer and turn in:

- Saint Benedict took concrete steps to guard his heart and mind. Do you think it is important for us to do the same?
- What are some “thorn bushes” in everyday life that can help us step away from temptation? (Consider accountability partners, tech filters, time limits, etc.)

Closing Prayer

An Ignatian Daily Examen is a brief prayer practice where we look back over our day to notice God’s presence and how well we responded to his guidance in our hearts. It helps us grow more aware of when we follow our conscience and when we let distractions or temptations steer us away from what’s best for us. Right now, we’re going to walk through the Examen step by step, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us. I encourage you to really engage in this activity in the moments of prolonged silence. Find a comfortable position, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths.

In the silence of your heart, recall a few moments from today when you felt close to God or felt like you followed his commands. This could be time set aside for prayer, a conversation with a friend, a harsh word left unsaid, a choice to avoid certain tempting situations, or anything else. Thank him for those blessings and the grace to be faithful to him.

At this time dim the lights wherever you are to help calm your mind. Set aside any distractions. If you have a crucifix or icon, display it prominently at the front or center of the room to help reflect on God’s presence.

Pause for two or three minutes.

Now, ask God to show you where you may have ignored your conscience or slipped into harmful choices. Ask for his mercy and guidance on how you can do better tomorrow.

Pause for two or three minutes.

Take some time to think through and commit to one practical step you’ll take to follow your conscience more faithfully.

Pause for a few moments.

Close with a prayer calling on the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit. Enlighten our minds and strengthen our wills. Help us to listen to your inspirations heard in the depths of our consciences. Guide us to what is good; keep us from what is evil. Help us to trust you more and hear you more clearly with each new day, Following your path, let us come to everlasting joy in the Kingdom of God. Amen.