

The Role of Conscience in Voting

As we prepare to exercise our right to vote as Catholics and as citizens of this nation in the general election, it is important to appreciate the central role of our conscience. No one can tell us how to vote. We are not robots or puppets. According to Catholic teaching, as Catholic Christians, we are expected to follow the voice of our conscience in voting as in all our choices and behavior. The two dimensions of faith and citizenship intertwine as we exercise our right to vote as Catholics in the United States of America.

The English word “conscience” comes from two Latin words that mean “to know with.” We are to know with Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Our consciences are formed through studying the Bible and teachings of the Church, examination of the facts, and prayerful reflection. Here are some quotes from various documents of the Catholic Church that describe the value of conscience.

1. “Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law that they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Their conscience is people’s most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths.” *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II*, n. 16, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1776.
2. “The human person sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law through conscience. All are bound to follow their conscience faithfully in every sphere of activity so that they may come to God, who is their last end. Therefore, the individual must not be forced to act against conscience nor be prevented from acting according to conscience, especially in religious matters.” *Declaration on Religious Freedom, Vatican II*, n. 3.
3. “In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path; we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church [hereafter CCC]*, 1994, n. 1785.
4. For the purpose of making moral choices, “human beings strive to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts.” *CCC*, n. 1788.
5. “A good and pure conscience is enlightened by true faith, for charity proceeds at the same time ‘from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith.’” *CCC*, n. 1794.

Here are some reflection questions to help you reflect on the value of conscience:

1. How is conscience different from simply doing what I want to do?
2. What has helped to form your conscience?
3. Think of a time when your informed conscience help you to make a good moral choice.
4. How will you use the gift of your conscience as you prepare to vote?

Fr. Thomas W. Krenik, Pastor of the Church of the Risen Savior