

Conscience

– Some Relevant Quotes –


Compiled by Casey Lopata




Primacy of Conscience is often described as one of Catholic teaching's best kept secrets, especially in regards to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender-related ministry. Here are some quotes—some less serious than others—that might help get that teaching out of the closet.





Fortunate Families
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But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will
 *put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. [Jeremiah 31:33].*

▼
Humankind looks at appearances but God looks at the heart. [1 Sam 16:7, quoted in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, 1975, and in National Council of Catholic Bishops Committee on Marriage and Family, Always Our Children, 1997/8].

▼
When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to
 *which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. [Romans 2:14-16. Cited as footnote, #1777 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd Edition, 1997].*

Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, 'Something is out of tune.' [Carl Jung, 1842-1896].


▼
In all his activity a person is bound to follow his/her conscience in order that he/she may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he/she is not to be forced to act in manner contrary to his/her conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he/she to be restrained from acting in accordance with his/her conscience, especially in matters religious. [Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Freedom, # 3, 1965].


▼
Deep within a person's conscience one discovers a law which one has not laid upon one's self but which one must obey. Its voice, ever calling the person to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in that person's heart at the right moment.... For one has in his or her heart a law inscribed by God.... One's conscience is one's most secret core and one's sanctuary. There one is alone with God whose voice echoes in that person's depths. [Vat. II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 16, 1965].

▼
Conscience is the chamber of justice.

[Origen of Alexandria, 185-234].



▼
Conscience is the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking. [H.L. Mencken, 1880-1956].

▼
Above the pope as an expression of the binding claim of Church authority, stands one's own conscience, which has to be obeyed first of all, if need be against the demands of Church authority. [Fr. Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI); from a commentary on *Gaudium et Spes* (*The Church in the Modern World*); In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (Vorgrimler, Herbert – Ed, Burns and Oats, 1969), p. 134].

▼
When one is dealing with people who are so predominately homosexual that they will be in serious personal and perhaps social trouble unless they attain a steady partnership within their homosexual lives, one can recommend them to seek such a partnership and one accepts this relationship as the best they can do in their present situation. [Fr. Jan Visser, (one of the authors of

Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, 1975, Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith—in a newspaper interview), *The Clergy Review* (London), 1976, v. 61, p.233].

▼
In fact, circumstances may exist . . . which would reduce or remove the culpability of the individual [engaged in homosexual activity] in a given instance. [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, # 11, 1986].

▼
The Church has consistently taught that a person of sincere conscience may have perceived and acted on a moral situation in a manner inconsistent with the teaching of the Church. Still, provided she or he did so with no intentional malice or desire to do wrong, the Christian tradition has recognized mitigated subjective culpability for a decision that objectively is wrong and ought not to have been made. Subjective culpability is determined by how diligently one strives to form correctly his or her conscience and how sincerely one follows that conscience. [United States Catholic Conference, *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, 1991, pp. 22-27].

Whether one is facing specific moral decisions or broader vocational questions, the Catholic tradition speaks of discernment as that process by which a person uses one's own reasoning ability, the sources of divine revelation (Scripture and tradition), the Church's teaching and guidance, the wise counsel of others, and one's own individual and communal experiences of grace in a sincere effort to choose wisely and well.... Ultimately, each person...must discern his or her own moral decisions.... With all the input and support possible, both from individuals and communities, one must still face the future based on decisions made before God in the recesses of one's own heart. As the bishops at Vatican II phrased it, 'Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths.' [United States Catholic Conference, *Human Sexuality*, 1991, p. 22-27].

▼ *Justice is conscience, not a personal conscience but the conscience of the whole of humanity. Those who clearly recognize the voice of their own conscience usually recognize also the voice of justice.* [Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 1918-].



Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking. [Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd Edition, #1777, 1997].



▼ *The person that loses their conscience has nothing left worth keeping.* [Izaak Walton, 1593-1683].

▼ *Conscience 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 all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law: "Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; I*

mean that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise. . . . [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.” [John Henry Cardinal Newman, "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," V, in *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching II* (London: Longmans Green, 1885), 248.] [Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd Edition, #1778, 1997].

Conscience is a mother-in-law whose visit never ends. [H.L. Mencken, 1880-1956].

I think we all have a little voice inside us that will guide us. It may be God, I don't know. But I think that if we shut out all the noise and clutter from our lives and listen to that voice, it will tell us the right thing to do. [Christopher Reeve, 1952-2004].

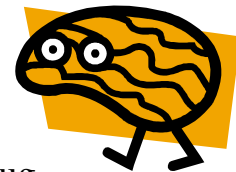
A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his/her conscience. If one were deliberately to act against it, one would condemn oneself. [Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd Ed., #1790, 1997].

Every human being has a work to carry on within, duties to perform abroad, influence to exert, which are peculiarly his, and which no conscience but his own can teach. [William Ellery Channing, 1780-1842].

An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law. [Martin Luther King, Jr.].

If a man (sic) is admonished by his own conscience—even an erroneous conscience, but one whose voice appears to him as unquestionable—he must always listen to it. What is not permissible is that he culpably indulge in error without trying to reach the truth. [John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 1994, p. 191].

A lot of people mistake a short memory for a clear conscience. [Doug Larson]



Pastoral care does not consist simply in the rigid and automatic application of objective moral norms. It considers the individual in his (or her) actual situation, with all his [or her] strengths and weaknesses. The decision of conscience . . . can only be made after prudent consideration of the real situation as well as the moral norm . . . the pastoral counseling of homophile persons cannot ignore the objective morality of homosexual genital acts, but it is important to interpret them, to understand the pattern of life in which they take place, to appreciate the personal meaning which these acts have for different people.... The pastor may distinguish between irresponsible, indiscriminate sexual activity and the permanent association between two homosexual persons, who feel incapable of enduring a solitary



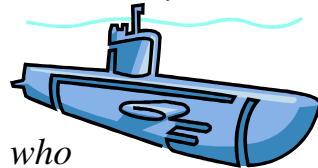
life devoid of sexual expression. This distinction may be borne in mind when offering

pastoral advice and establishing the degree of responsibility. [English and Welsh Bishops, Pastoral Letter, 1980].



I will say what the church teaches -that to be actively homosexual is wrong. But every one of us has to come to terms with church

teaching and apply it to our own lives in light of our own conscience with the guidance of the church. I don't make judgments about a gay person's conscience any more than about the military man at a SAC air base



or on a Trident submarine who would fire a nuclear weapon if ordered to. I

think in some ways the church teaching on that is clearer than on homosexuality. Any act of war that would destroy an entire city indiscriminately is an abomination. That is what nuclear weapons are all about. Anybody who has the intention of using such weapons is, in my judgment, in a situation that is drastically evil. And yet I cannot judge another person's conscience. If that person comes to communion, I cannot refuse. [Detroit Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, when asked what he would each, National Catholic Reporter, Nov. 4, 1994, p.6].



[Blank] [National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Marriage and Family, Always Our Children, 1997/98]. [NOTE: A section on conscience in an earlier draft was not included in the final statement].



You accuse me of being a 'Cafeteria Catholic' because I say



that a gay or lesbian Catholic must follow his or her informed conscience with regard to same-sex sexual relations, even if his or her

conscience is not in conformance with Church teaching. Yet, by not accepting the doctrine of the Primacy of Conscience you are admitting that you are a 'Cafeteria Catholic.' [Casey Lopata, response [unspoken, in charity] to questioner in workshop on the Church and Gay and Lesbian Persons., 1999].



It is important that Church ministers listen to the experiences, needs, and hopes of the persons with a homosexual inclination to whom and with whom they minister. Dialogue provides an exchange of information, and also communicates a respect for the innate dignity of other persons and a respect for their consciences. [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*, 2006, p. 24].



On the one hand, we have to follow our conscience; on the other hand, our conscience may be wrong. In the latter case, we may be responsible for the erroneous conscience (in which instance our error is vincible) or our error may be beyond our control (invincible error). The former is the product of our sinfulness, the latter of our finitude. The exercise of conscience, however, is always guided by the cardinal virtue of prudence. Prudence is essentially the capacity for discernment. It is not to be equated with an attitude of caution, restraint, timidity, or conservatism. Rather, the prudent person is one who can make decisions. Prudence formulates and imposes the correct dictates of reason upon the human person (recta ratio agibilium, as Thomas Aquinas put it). Prudence does not answer the question: "What is the best way in principle to do the right thing?" Rather: "What is the best way for me, in this situation (i.e., in the light of these relationships and responsibilities), to do the right thing?" The prudent person, therefore, must investigate the situation and take counsel from others. A judgment must be formulated in light of this inquiry and advice, and a decision must be made. The prudent person is in the moral order what a creative artist is in the intellectual and aesthetic orders. The novelist,

for example, is constantly faced with the problem of deciding what to write and how to write it.

Prudence presupposes the following qualities: knowledge of moral principles, experience and the ability to profit by it, an ability to learn from others, an ability to make rational inferences, a certain inventiveness or creativity, vision of foresight, an ability to see and weigh circumstances, an ability to anticipate obstacles and plan to surmount them, and finally an ability to decide in the light of all the preceding. [Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1994, p. 975].



Then, without realizing it, you try to improve yourself at the start of each new day; of course, you achieve quite a lot in the course of time. Anyone can do this, it costs nothing and is certainly very helpful. Whoever doesn't know it must learn and find by experience that a quiet conscience makes one strong. [Anne Frank, 1929-1942].



There are no infallible criteria to determine of the decision of conscience is true. But the peace and joy of conscience remains the best criterion. Other criteria involve all the virtues, values, norms, experiences, and examples promoted by the church

community and people of good will. The individual decision maker must always be aware of the possibility of deception, lack of openness, and short circuiting the process. But the dangers and possible abuses do not negate the fundamental role of the joy and peace of a “good conscience.” [Charles E. Curran, “Conscience in the Light of Catholic Moral Tradition,” *Conscience: Readings in Moral Theology*, No. 14, 2004, p. 22].



When we die, and as a moral theologian I don't say this lightly, the only thing that will matter is how we treated each other. [Bishop Kenneth E. Untener, *Hallmarks of the Church* [Address delivered at a New Ways Ministry Symposium, March 28, 1992], in *Voices of Hope*, Eds. Jeannine Gramick & Robert Nugent, (New York: Center for Homophobia Education, 1995), p. 151].

