

Conscience and grace: A Lenten meditation

The scriptures of Lent in the Church's daily liturgy invite two related reflections. The weeks immediately preceding Easter call us to walk to Jerusalem in imitation of Christ, so that, at Easter, we, too might be blessed with baptismal water and sent into the world on mission. The preceding weeks, those immediately following Ash Wednesday, propose a serious examination of conscience: What is there in me that's broken? What's impeding my being the missionary disciple I was baptized to be?

This Lent, that examination of conscience might well include some serious thinking about what "conscience" means.

That often-contentious subject has returned to the center of the world Catholic conversation, thanks to the forthcoming 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, Blessed Paul VI's prophetic encyclical on the morally appropriate means of family planning, and the ongoing discussion generated by Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation on marriage, *Amoris Laetitia*. In that conversation, voices have been heard urging a view of conscience that is curious, even dangerous: under certain circumstances, conscience may permit or even require that a person choose acts that the Church has consistently taught are intrinsically wrong – such as using artificial means of contraception, or receiving Holy Communion while living the married life in a union that's not been blessed by the Church.

Those propounding this idea of "conscience" urge us to recognize three things: that the spiritual and moral life is a journey; that when the Church teaches that some things are just wrong and no combination of intentions and consequences can make them right, the Church is proposing an "ideal" to which the most "generous" response may not always be possible; and that confessors and spiritual directors should be compassionate and discerning guides along the often rocky pathways of the moral life.

No reasonable person will contest the last claim. I'm grateful that I've been the beneficiary of such thoughtful guidance, and more than once. But the other two

claims seem problematic, to put it gently.

If, for example, “conscience” can command me to use artificial means of contraception because of my life-circumstances, why couldn’t conscience permit, or even require, that I continue to defraud customers if my business is in debt and my family would suffer from its failure, even as I work my way into a better, more honest financial situation? Why couldn’t “conscience” permit me, on my journey toward the “ideal,” to continue to indulge in extracurricular sex while my spouse and I work out the kinks in our marriage? Inside the idea that “conscience” can permit or even require us to do something long understood to be wrong, period, where’s the circuit-breaker that would stop a couple from “discerning” that an abortion is the best resolution of the difficulties involved in carrying *this* unborn child to term, although under future circumstances they would embrace the “ideal” and welcome a child into their family?

The further claim being made here – that God can ask me, through my conscience, to do things that do not cohere with the teaching of the Church – fractures the bonds between God, the Church’s teaching authority, and conscience in perilous ways.

Christ promised to maintain his Church in the truth (John 8.32; John 16.3). Has that promise been broken? The Council of Trent taught that it’s always possible, with the help of God’s grace, to obey the commandments – that God wills our transformation and helps us along the way to holiness. Has that teaching been rescinded? Replaced by a “paradigm shift” into the radical subjectivism that’s emptied most of liberal Protestantism of spiritual and moral ballast? Vatican II taught that within my conscience is “a law inscribed by God?” Is God now telling me that I can violate the truth he has written into my heart?

To suggest that the Church teaches “ideals” that are impossible to live undervalues the power of grace and empties the moral life of the drama built into it by God himself. Lent does not call us to confess that we’ve failed to live up to an unachievable “ideal;” Lent does not call us to be self-exculpatory like the Pharisee in Luke 18.10-14, who went away unjustified. Lent calls us to embrace the humility of the Gospel publican and confess that we have sinned, knowing that God’s mercy can heal what is broken in us if we cooperate with his grace.

