

# Conscience guides us

Throughout the ages conscience has been described in various ways. Origen, who lived around the year 200, called it “the chamber of justice.” Carl Jung said “through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface ... a small voice says to us, ‘Something is out of tune,’ ” and our own H.L. Mencken put it this way, “Conscience is the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking.”

We may well recall how as children conscience took on the form of that fellow with the pitch fork, tail and horns who sat on one shoulder while a winged angelic form was on the other side, each competing for our attention to their direction as to which way to go.

Perhaps conscience is best described as the seat of the Divine within us, ever calling us to be our best self, living in union with God and God’s ways.

Pope Paul VI put it this way:

“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” (“Gaudium et Spes,” 16).

While we usually can easily know the right thing to do, there are times when it is not so clear, and the challenge to know what direction to go in or what it is that God requires of us can be quite burdensome.

Some years ago a part of my ministry was working with individuals who had problems with anger, often giving it free expression in violent behavior, even as far as taking the life of another or physically assaulting someone. It was amazing how so many of these individuals really did not have a feeling of remorse for their behavior, did not judge it inappropriate and actually felt it warranted because of some real or perceived wrong done to them. What about the consciences of these persons?

We are told in the Catechism of the Catholic Church that: “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself” (1790). Persons, such as I worked with, made poor and erroneous judgments, but they themselves felt they were doing the right thing. Their consciences were like mirrors covered with dust not allowing for a clear view of reality. Usually after a period of therapy, often a long one, the dust began to blow away and they began to perceive and understand where they had gone wrong. In fact at times they were so overwhelmed by what they now realized that they became clinically depressed over their harmful behavior.

For most of us our consciences are much more available to us, but there can be times when conscience can become clouded, such as when we think that the end justifies the means, or that we can treat others less than we would want to be treated, or that we don’t have to respect the consciences of others.

If conscience is that ever-guiding voice of God within us, then it behooves us to do all we can to benefit from the clarity of that voice, from the wisdom of the One who is Wisdom itself. This is a lifelong task, really a pilgrimage to that place of complete union of mind and heart with God and his holy will. This journey is aided by the living Word of God, the Scriptures, the teachings of the church, the advice of competent people, the wisdom of the saints, the virtue of prudence and of course the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Prayer and the reception of the sacraments, and quiet time with the Lord, all help us on this lifelong journey.

Rumi, that great Sufi poet, advises us to “be silent under the shade tree of (the) teacher” if we are to learn and free ourselves from our own prideful guidelines on behavior and what we are to do. In silence and in listening we are truly able to hear the blessed and melodious wisdom coming from the divine source.

Pope Benedict XVI once remarked that in listening to good music we are brought to the very threshold of “the Maker of all harmony.”

Music, art, beauty, these too aid us in coming closer to God and knowing which way God would have us go.

*This is the third in a series of articles about the six-week fall session of Why*

*Catholic?*