

A pastoral letter by Archbishop Borders

My dear friends in Christ:

We read in a preface of the Sunday Liturgy: "All things are of your making, all times and seasons obey your laws, but you choose to create man to your own image, setting him over the whole world in all its wonder."

Thus in our liturgical prayer we happily sing of God's love for us and the dignity that is ours because of that love. Personal dignity comes from the gift of life and the gift of freedom. People have rights and duties which flow directly from their humanity—from their freedom. These rights and duties protect and promote human dignity. We all have them simply because we are human, not because of our intelligence, background, contribution to society, race, class, or nationality. Each person is both sacred and social by nature. For human beings, family, state, and society are a natural context for living. They are neither optional nor peripheral for growth and well-being, but are essential for personal development.

The difficulty is that as individual persons and as co-responsible members of society we do not live up to the human potential that is ours both because of creation and because of redemption. We sadly acknowledge the struggle of personal sin expressed in choice and action, and the social consequences of sin in the structures of human communities.

Literature and drama at times expresses this struggle in a stark and compelling manner. The play based on the life of St. Thomas More titled *A Man for All Seasons*, was such a work. Recently, in the Baltimore *Sun* a headline relative to this play caught my attention. The writer was commenting on the revival of Robert Bolt's play as this revival was enacted by the students of The Catholic University of America in Washington. He asked himself the question, could the dynamic nature of the play 10 years after its first staging really hold an audience today? He concluded after he saw the play that it had the same impact, and then he went into various reasons for this impact, but I think he missed the basic and fundamental reason that makes Bolt's play compelling. *A Man for All Seasons* is a drama in the true sense, but a drama that has value because it portrays the basic struggle and courage of a man, St. Thomas More, who had to face up to his conscience and the call to love God above the prestige of his service to the king.

For me Bolt's story of Thomas More was the story of a person caught in conflict, a conflict that he had to resolve and a conflict most difficult to deal with. Thomas More had to decide whether he would be loyal to the king or to God. When he made his decision to live his life in God's love, he spoke words that I think have stayed in the minds of many people for years—words that any responsible Christian can use in dealing with life. Faced with sure death, having threaded his way through every possible argument that would give him a way to serve both cross and crown, he had a meeting with his daughter, and his daughter protested More's actions very strongly. She challenged him: "Haven't you done as much as reason can demand?" More responded to his daughter and said, "Finally it isn't a matter of reason; finally it is a matter of love."

Simple response

something we are about to do and whether that something is good or bad. Each time we make a moral judgment our conscience is acting.

We make hundreds of moral judgments every day. Getting into an automobile to drive to work is a moral judgment. Making the decision to drive alone rather than coming in a car pool is a moral judgment. Such judgments involve the expenditure of fuel energy and contribute to environmental pollution. You will say, "Well, these are rather superficial judgments." They might be, in our scheme of life, but they are moral judgments. There are, however, other questions that tax our conscience more severely such as decisions to commit an aged person to a nursing home. Together with my family I have made that decision myself. When our mother broke her hip and lost her sight, we just couldn't take care of her adequately without causing her even more pain. So we made the decision to place her in a nursing home. That was a hard judgment for us. It was also a moral judgment.

Forming a right conscience

There are many questions that tax our conscience severely. Decisions that any responsible Christian must face are decisions that require us to consider seriously what we must do here and now in relationship to God, and what we must do here and now to promote the good of our neighbor. Again this is conscience in action. Making these decisions with the freedom God has granted to us demands that we form a right conscience. And the goal involved in a right conscience formation is to prepare a person to work with grace in making mature and responsible moral decisions. Such decisions will need to be made in such a way that there remains a recognition of the fact of evil and human sinfulness. Evil exists in the world; no question about it. And sometimes it is not easy to discern what is evil, because of our culture, because of our own hang-ups, because of the ambiguity in our lives.

But how do I form my conscience? How will any one of us who hopes to profess our Catholic faith form his or her conscience? This is what we ask ourselves. We know, of course, in the world today, the complexities of life make decisions very difficult. In a simpler culture, we might have simply asked, "What does the Church teach?" The question was a valid one, and probably we were able to make our own valid judgment. We still need to ask that question, but we have to go much deeper in our response. We must listen to the Holy Spirit within the Church. We must pray; we must believe that a life responding to the invitation of Christ cannot be satisfied by a mere recitation of answers that are composed by somebody else for our benefit.

I am not just talking about the psychological internalizing of something; I'm talking about making Christian principles inherent in the truths that Christ revealed, our own, to the extent that they become an integral part of our lives. These principles belong to us and consciously we decide what we must do. This is absolutely essential. If we are to be true to the gift of the spiritual life that God gave us in Baptism, and if we choose to strive continuously to see that God's kingdom on earth is fruitful, we have an obligation to act with an informed conscience.

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Now when I hear many people speak of difficulties they face daily, I think that I want to say, as More did to his daughter; that when you make decisions that mold your own life and mold the lives of your children, finally it isn't primarily a matter of reason; it's a matter of love.

You might say that this is a simple response in a very complicated world in which there are many pressures. And if you would tell me this, I would agree with you; I think it is. It is a simple answer; however, it is not a simplistic answer—and there is a tremendous difference between the two. Fundamental and basic truths cut through to the heart of the matter, through the complexities and sophistications of life, to the reality of existence. We have a call to be completely human. Christ came into the world to enable us to return to the human and humane qualities that are ours; and since we are made to the likeness of God, we have a freedom that enables us to direct our lives in our journey to God. Now if we read St. John, we know that he tells us that "God is love."

The journey to God then means that we are in a constant search for love. I don't think that any convinced Christian should ever sincerely question this reality. We cannot possibly find fulfillment as persons, as human beings, unless we have the capacity for love. And the capacity for love is greater and more important than the capacity of receiving love. Of course, they go hand in hand, but the second follows the first—always. During the journey to God, we make many decisions about how completely we can love our God. And the demands of love sometimes scare a person. They scare me. When we choose to be unloving, when we are unwilling to respond to the demands that God seems to make of us, when we make decisions for self and self-interest alone rather than God, we sin.

Some may say, "That's not my definition of sin. I define sin as breaking God's law." But when we have admitted that breaking God's law is sin, and when we recognize that sin is moral failure, we have acknowledged something as true without having described something that is complete. Sin is a reality; it is not just a taboo. It is the only real evil in the world.

The famous psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Menninger, who surprised people of many disciplines when he analyzed the effects of disorder and evil, in his book, *Whatever Happened To Sin*, says, "The wrongfulness of sinful acts lies not merely in its non-conformity, its departure from the accepted appropriate way of behavior...but in a hurting, a breaking away from God and the rest of humanity..." When we refuse to be concerned with people who live around us, we sin. Sin, then, is more than an act; it's a state of being.

Alienated from God

That sounds strange, to say that sin is a state of being, but that is what it is. Sin is a state of being alienated from God and from people, a state of being turned inward to self. When Christians turn to themselves and away from God, they are dead, and that is frightening because the real evil of sin is in the persons, not in the act. Their sin is deadly—mortal. But a Christian does not live his life to be dead through sin. He lives his life trying to deepen the love relationship he has with God—the love relationship that is the gift given to him at Baptism.

So each one of us might ask ourselves two basic questions: How do I as a Christian know what is a loving act? How do I know what is indicative of a loving relationship with God, and what is very likely a sign of broken friendship? These questions are probably some of the most critical of Christian living. These questions do have answers. In the revealed Word of God, in the lengthy tradition of our Church, and in the experience of those who have successfully lived the Christian life, we have the data which will enable us to respond with love to conflict-situations in our Christian experience. Using these insights, we can integrate our lives and face the often complex task of moral decision-making. The human faculty which each of us possesses for working through our moral decisions is conscience.

Possibly for many years past and even currently, too many people, too many Christians, have thought that the feeling of guilt they perceived after doing something they felt wrong was their conscience speaking to them. Yet we know that conscience is not a feeling, even though obviously it is related to feelings, because we are total persons, and our feelings become involved. It isn't even a thing inside or outside of us saying, "Yes, you can," and "No, you can't," do something. Conscience is a judgment. With the data at hand, knowledge gained from education, traditions that we have valued, the teaching of our Church, ultimately God's revelation informing our own personal experience, we make a judgment about

essential. If we are to be true to the gift of the spiritual life that God gave us in Baptism, and if we choose to strive continuously to see that God's kingdom on earth is fruitful, we have an obligation to act with an informed conscience.

Knowledge needed

Herein lies the difficulty. What is an informed conscience? I think that theologians would tell us that it is important to have the necessary knowledge to make the kind of decisions that would make our world a better place because we as Christians live in that world and have an obligation to that world. But this knowledge isn't just the knowledge we have of ourselves. The knowledge necessary for us to act as responsible Christians comes to us from the people, the experiences, and the institutions around us. Our parents are key persons in the formation of our conscience. Certainly my parents had a tremendous impact on me. They were good people. Our culture and its laws, while not necessarily good, and definitely limited, still have an impact on us. Some of the laws we might not agree with, but they have influenced us. Our Church helps us to act responsibly and to develop informed consciences by sharing with us the data of the long experience of life and the living witness of Christian revelation.

A five-year-old child who steals a candy bar wouldn't normally be considered responsible for his actions. Let's compare that example to the theoretical case of the head of a company who last winter raised the prices of oil when his company had a large supply of oil in storage. His was a decision that affected the entire country. What makes the difference? I suggest that there are both internal and external factors which help to account for this difference. The age level and maturity we have achieved, our emotional growth and stability enter into our decision-making as Christians. These are internal factors in our decision-making. The many forces outside of us play a very strong role in forming our perception of "the good" and "the bad." Many of these forces, like priests,

parents, and teachers, communicate information to us in a formal and direct way. But there are other less formal learning experiences—like the things we see our parents do, the living witness of Christian men and women who demonstrate by their lives that they believe in Christ and the Gospel. For example, we have several nursing homes here in the Baltimore area; we can see values expressed by the people who work in these homes and dedicate their lives to the sick and elderly. We see in action the judgment of Christ: "I was sick and you comforted me."

You are probably asking yourselves at this point: "What about the Church? What is it that the Church does for my conscience?" When we as Christians, and especially Catholic Christians, have accepted the gift of faith, with it we recognize that the Church is a teacher, a molder of values, and the Church helps us to interpret the Will of God as God is revealed to us in the Scriptures and in the great living traditions of our Church down through the centuries. The Church's task, and something of my task as pastor, is to reiterate the message of Jesus in concrete everyday situations of contemporary life.

Making Revelation concrete

Most of us who read Scripture prayerfully are amazed at the depth of our insight into God's Word. We forget that Christ revealed truths and principles in a particular culture in history, under certain circumstances, but the truths that He revealed are eternal and have to be translated in succeeding cultures and succeeding languages from the point of reference of where people live and are. What Christ revealed does not change, but there is no question that we change, and we must make concrete the revelation of Christ. Therefore the teaching of the Church will sometimes have to take a positive stand against the values of the society in which we live. The Church at times receives criticism and opposition for taking such stands. For example, the Church of Baltimore has taken stands against abortion, against Senate Bill 60 (The Natural Death Act), and the current capital punishment law. You would be surprised how many expressions of protest I received because of these stands. But we must stand up and be counted and try to translate into the life of today where we should be as children of God.

When the Church teaches through her pastors, the bishops of the Church, she is guided by the Holy Spirit. But that guidance of the Spirit is no guarantee that the humanness of official teachers might not at times cloud these issues in some areas where there have been no infallible Church pronouncements. In these instances, the bishops in their pastoral responsibility must give witness to their own conscience and work toward necessary revisions.

The Holy Spirit works in every generation, but not every person or every generation responds to the Holy Spirit. The Church is immense. Sometimes we identify the Church with the hierarchy;

in the film version of the play.

sometimes people identify the Church with the local parish; sometimes I've known children to identify the Church solely with their parents. But all of us are the Church, and we all need to respond. Sometimes we possibly might find ourselves in a position where we honestly have a conflict we cannot resolve. We need counsel. No one can ever move into the life of anyone else and make his or her decision; it is unfair to ask someone to make a moral decision for a mature Christian.

Human experience for a Christian is dominated by an awareness and appreciation of the great gift we receive in Baptism that offers and shares with us a love relationship with God. Christian experience is deeper than a human experience; i.e., the love relationship of human beings informed and permeated by the love of God. Love relationships that human beings have with each other which follow a love relationship with God are also changed. Being a Christian is not something like putting on or taking off a coat; it is not something superficial or accidental to our psyche, our human personality. When we receive the gift of Baptism we enter a covenant relationship with God, and this covenant relationship is consummated wherever love is offered and accepted.

Role of moral law

~~Law, divine law and sometimes human law, is necessary to~~ make this relationship concrete. Therefore we need law, and we can never move away from it. Moral law facilitates the living out of this relationship of God and neighbor. It is necessary for us to study, to pray, to listen, in order that we can discern what God would have us do. Therefore, we can't just step away, and off the top of our head make decisions. We certainly need more depth. Each and every day, each one of us must accept the responsibility of integrating the data offered through experience and faith. This is vital and personal in the total process of moral decision-making.

It is on this level that we speak of conscience. We must always remember who we are. We are the Church, a community of faith, and we are individuals within the Church, and each of us has received an invitation and has the obligation to respond to the Holy Spirit and form our own conscience. Let me recall to you that the role of the conscience is that of a judge, not a teacher; that conscience does not teach what is good or evil, nor does it create good or evil. It weighs accumulated data, makes a judgment in very concrete, not theoretical, situations, the concrete situations of our lives.

In most instances, one who accepts the gift of grace and uses his or her native talents can arrive at good sound judgment with moral certitude. Absolute certainty in complex moral matters is seldom possible. Yet the task of the Church constituted by Christ is to present fully and clearly truth which will facilitate the living of the Christian life. This teaching role is exercised in many ways, and with varying degrees of authority—all the way from the infallible pronouncements of the Holy Father to the everyday witness of our brothers and sisters through whom the Holy Spirit also works.

Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a great emphasis on the value of dialogue among Christian people. This dialogue has taught us among other things that there is a possibility for legitimate disagreement with others in the Church and still enjoy our common faith. The fact of our Baptism says that we share a common priesthood, a priesthood that has as one of its offices a teaching role. There is a wisdom in the baptized, a wisdom that can teach. We must be open then to the possibility that the Spirit speaks to us in many ways, through many persons and through many experiences, giving insight into the Gospel and Christian traditions. Pope John XXIII states this clearly when, in opening the Second Vatican Council, he said: "Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which by (people's) own efforts and even beyond their expectations are directed to the fulfillment of God's inscrutable designs ... everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church."

Silence and reflection

All that I have said up to now says what St. Paul tells us, that

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we must "put on the mind of Christ." Lent is a good time for us to ask ourselves if we have done that. To put on the mind of Christ we need time for silence and reflection in our lives. It is easy for us to reply, "...but I don't have any time!" But think about what such a statement implies: God is not very central in my life — and the burden and responsibility of silence and reflection are too much for me. Can any one of us afford to say that? I often find myself wishing that I had more time to pray, more time to reflect, more time to abide in silence. But I, too, feel the pressure of daily life. I know your distractions. Yet I will ask you as your pastor to be a person of prayer, for I know that your Christian virtues will challenge and move me to be a better pastor and a more thorough, sensitive teacher. This interaction made vital by the Holy Spirit will do wonders for enriching our lives and the Church of Baltimore.

We have reflected together about the decisions and actions of a responsible Christian. We have considered the nature and formation of a Christian conscience and about the possibility of legitimate disagreements. Yet even as we reflect on so many complex things we can thank God that our faith brings us a realistic, not childlike, security. The Church in God's Providence is both teacher and molder of values. The role of the Church is to interpret the Will of God for us as revealed in the Scriptures and in the living Christian traditions. The Church in helping us to form our conscience is guided by the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit. Because we believe in the Holy Spirit and believe that the Spirit guides the Church we can have a deep and abiding confidence in the future.

I affirm this confidence in the face of difficult moral situations which confront us and with the knowledge that we have the final responsibility to form our conscience. The moral tradition of the Church has always attested that conscience is inviolable and no man is forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience.

Yet I would like to reflect on some real difficulties that families come into contact with each day, difficulties that can shake our confidence in the future.

Escape or maturity

The pressures and conflicts of our society are felt by young and old alike. For some, the pressures seem too great, and escape is sought in a bottle or a drug. Some of the saddest commentary on our contemporary society is found in the high statistics of alcoholic incidence and the use of other drugs, especially by our youth. We are told that the misuse of alcohol is a rising problem once again among our teenaged youth in Maryland. You parents who have known the pain of seeing a son or daughter caught in the stuporous serenity of marijuana, or worse one of the "hard" drugs, understand well the tragedy of the drug culture. You have also encountered many children psychically scarred by exposure to an alcoholic mother or father.

What brings a young person or adult to a potentially destructive use of drugs? The answers are both too many and too hidden. But there is one thing certain: at some point in that person's life, a choice was confronted and a decision made. The accumulated data of conscience-formation present themselves; the moral norms of Church and society, learned from parents or other sources are brought to bear on the conflicting issues — and a choice is made. It is clear that for too many the choice is made in favor of "escape" instead of mature, responsible living. Whether a person opts for escape or maturity, either option exacts a price. But only one can deepen and expand the potential for human growth and Christian perfection. "Escape" is a retreat back to immaturity and dehumanizing dependence.

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perfection. Escape is a retreat back to immaturity and dehumanizing dependence.

Personal conscience confronted by these or other conflict situations must weigh many values and disvalues: the peacefulness of release brought on by the drink or the drug; the temporary freedom from life's reality; the potential physical damage; the pain inflicted on spouse, children, or parents; the departure from God's law which asks us to care for the gift which is our life and our health; the breach of civil law which seeks to keep order and protect the individual and common good. These are some of the conflicting values that must be weighed. Being right, responsible, honest, and, sometimes, courageous, is not easy by human standards. But it is Christian, and it is possible with grace. Each one of us must use the grace God gives, not only for our own decisions in life, but also for the support of others who may be less strong. Our witness, our perseverance, must give hope to our brothers and sisters. It will bring happiness to us and enable us to be truly human.

Making responsible Christian decisions demands that we find support to lead a life in Jesus' name. That support can be found in the believing community that is our Church. I know, even as I write this pastoral letter, that my journeys to the various parts of the Archdiocese will continue to speak to me about the hard questions that each of you must face. But if our reflections together have given us the support of hoping together, we know that in union with Christ, we can find peace and that life will be in many communities a better place.

Accepting responsibility

It will be better for us and those whom we love, for we will accept the responsibility and love relationship as true Christians.

It is in accepting the responsibility for moral decision-making that the human person activates the uniquely human qualities of intelligence and reason which are the great gifts of God. The power to develop and shape the future, to determine the course of individual and communal human existence, is an awesome one. The Christian faces the challenge with grace and faith: that God does care about the individual and the world...and that with the enduring hope and promise of God to be always with us, the Church mediates that faith and that hope.

A well-formed and honest human conscience allows the Christian to make moral decisions boldly and responsibly. A conscience so formed and so exercised admits the risk of error. We're going to make mistakes, and we will risk error, but please God we will so live that sin will not be an option in our lives. We can make a mistake without sin. Sin is the only thing in the world that ruptures our relationship with God. Ultimately, for a mature person, sin is the only thing that can bring unhappiness. Now I'm not equating sadness with unhappiness. We can be sad and very good and moral. We can be disillusioned and good and moral. We can fail in various projects and be good and moral. Happiness ultimately is a relationship with God, a relationship that also frees us to relate in harmony with other people

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I'd like to conclude by going back to *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II that treats of our ultimate union with God in this, our period of salvation history. The Council Fathers stated explicitly that Scripture teaches that God wills the salvation, the eternal happiness of all persons. But there is always the second movement to this symphony of love; i.e., that a person cannot be saved without himself or without herself. Every person must turn freely to God. For us who believe in an order over and above that of the temporal and the temporary, this turning to God and the acceptance of His loving Will for men, even though he has revealed Himself at times in an obscure fashion, is called an act of faith. It is a free decision of a person to accept as true that God has spoken to us, in former times, in fragmentary and varied fashions through the prophets, but in this final age He has spoken to us in His Son.

Hopefully we of the Church will follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in understanding our love relationship with the Son.

William D. Borders

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