

## Conscience

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On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October of this year, on the eve of the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, his Jesuit “spiritual son,” Jorge Bergolio, Pope Francis, gave the Church his latest encyclical (literally a letter to be circulated and read by all, that lays out the Church’s stance on a subject of import), that is entitled *Fratelli Tutti* – All Brothers [and Sisters!]

(See: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)).

This is a “social encyclical,” one that addresses issues faced by everyone in the world we occupy today. It is intended for Roman Catholics and for all others, regardless of nationality, race, religious ascription, gender or political identity, that is written in an approachable, readable language. Grounded in the “Admonitions” of St. Francis of Assisi, “who used these words to ‘address his brothers and sisters [to propose] to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel. The encyclical aims to promote a universal aspiration toward fraternity and social friendship.” (See: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-10/fratelli-tutti-pope-fraternity-social-friendship-short-summary.html>).

It is not a light read! At forty-three thousand words, spanning eight chapters and two hundred and two hundred and eighty-seven paragraphs (with two hundred and eighty-eight footnotes – the most proffered by this Pontiff!), Pope Francis sets out his vision for an ideal world in which all peoples and nations can be part of, and contribute to, the entire “human family.” It is, in short, a vision for the Kingdom of God for today, where:

The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.  
The infant will play near the cobra’s den,  
and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest.  
They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea (Is. 11/6-9).

This is not a glib read! Nor ought it to be read quickly. No, this is a work of papal magisterium that invites a thoughtful, leisurely, even spiritual demeanour, so that his words find a home in heart, mind, and soul.

Found in paragraph 275 is found:

It should be acknowledged that ‘among the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles.’”

A “desensitized human conscience,” in the context of “prevailing individualism,” and a [deifying] of the human person”? What does all of this mean?

Pope Saint John Paul II once observed: “Conscience in [a human being] is like an inner source of light and an organ of sight ... Conscience first and foremost determines whether or not [a human being] lives in truth” (See: *A Treasury of Quips, Quotes and Anecdotes for Preachers and Teachers*, Anthony Castle, ed., Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT: 1998, p. 276). This is truly, personal reality, isn’t it? Well, it is, and it isn’t. It is that inner voice, that interior nudge, that tells us right from wrong, like a small boy’s definition of conscience: “Something that makes you tell your mother before your sister does” (See: *More Quips, Quotes and Anecdotes for Preachers and Teachers*, Anthony Castle, ed., Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT: 2001, p. 269). Even Roman Catholic theologian Timothy O’Connell, observes: “Conscience can be understood as a characteristic of human persons whereby they experience themselves as accountable for their behaviour. This sense of accountability is evident when humans confess and apologize, when they accept responsibility for past actions and seek to make amends” (See: “Conscience,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. M. Downey, ed., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN: 1993, p. 200).

It is, indeed, a highly personal, even private reality. Yet, the Holy Father situates conscience within two equally relevant criteria: “prevailing individualism,” and a [deifying] of the human person.” Few would argue the supremacy of the individual and their inherent human rights: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Declaration-of-Independence/Text-of-the-Declaration-of-Independence>). The problem arises when conscience is seen as something purely personal without the context of the commonweal – “the happiness, health, and safety of all of the people of a community or nation” (See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commonweal>). Without that context, the danger of both “prevailing individualism” and “deifying of the human person” become very real.

So the individual conscience must be understood not only in a personal context, it must be seen in a larger, communitarian one.

Timothy O’Connell cited above on pages 201 and 202, posits four elements to the formation of conscience that we might consider in order to clarify this and to offer us a way forward.

“First, one’s conscience is formed by experience.” As we grow, we encounter new experiences every day: from the discovery of our hands to the ability to walk, from being able to speak to how our words may impact another, from listening to the opinions of others to the reading we have done, from reading the *National Geographic* to being able to travel to the places we have read about.

“Second, it follows from this that moral education is a developmental project that lasts through the course of one’s life.” A wise professor once told me, “Roger, you’ll be learning life’s lessons until the moment they nail the lid on your coffin.” How true that is!

“Third, where ethical deficiencies are discerned, the strategy of choice is not the imposition of information but rather the provision of further experiences. For example, one will grow much more from a day in a soup kitchen than from lectures on the moral obligations of charity.”

“Fourth, the project of conscience formation is radically communal. Hence the Church can be viewed not only as a teacher of moral values and a source for moral support (which it is), but also as a community of moral education, the place where conscience-shaping experiences take place and where individuals consequently grow in insight into moral value.” This, then, is the very antidote to “prevailing individualism,” and [deifying] of the human person” spoken of by Pope Francis.

“Fifth, experiences may be either immediate or vicarious, that is, they can be genuine ‘real live’ experiences, or they can be imagined experiences. Storytelling, and narrative more broadly, is pivotal to the project of moral education in precisely this reason: it engenders imagined, vicarious experiences.” Ah, the power of stories, novels, poetry and movies!

“Finally, this has implications for spirituality. It explains the central role often given to the use of imagination in prayer. It clarifies the life-shaping role of liturgy and other rituals. It names in a new way the central Christian project of discipleship. And it describes from within the human person the dynamics by which is enacted the radical gospel challenge to love God and neighbour.” Love God and neighbour: it is not just about me – it is about you, too. And, it is about everyone on the planet!

W. Morely Punshon, the English Nonconformist minister (d. 1881, See: (*See: More Quips, Quotes and Anecdotes for Preachers and Teachers*, Anthony Castle, ed., Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT: 2001, p. 270). wisely observed:

Cowardice asks, Is it safe?  
Expediency asks, Is it politic?  
Vanity asks, Is it popular?  
But Conscience asks, Is it right?

Is it *right* for me as I sit before God in the still silence of my heart? Is it *right* for my spouse/partner /child/friend/neighbour/colleague as I sit in the still silence of my heart before God? Is it *right* for my community/neighbourhood/college/workplace/city/state/nation/world as I sit in the still silence of my heart before God?

Do this, and conscience will undoubtedly be what Pope Saint John Paul II wisely counselled: “Conscience in [a human being] is like an inner source of light and an organ of sight ... Conscience first and foremost determines whether or not [a human being] lives in truth.”