

Three Minute Teaching **January 12 & 13**

The second question offered by the Education Commission for the series of Three Minute Teachings is: “What is an informed conscience?”

At the out set, it is important to note that most Christian writers are coming to see that it is a misleading metaphor to speak of a person having a conscience. The reality is that each person is a conscience. In this sense, conscience is not a special faculty or power; it is not a specific act or the result of guilt feelings. It’s rather the whole person engaged in a drive toward and a demand for that which is of value. That which is right and good.

We literally spend a lifetime forming our conscience, forming ourselves into a morally responsible human being who at any time can be called to account by society, by God and even by our own inner self. In our early years, we learn to control behavior on the basis of pleasure and pain, reward and punishment. As we mature, we learn to internalize principles, to see the rationale behind laws and teachings, to understand the values they promote. Ideally, we begin to do things because we believe it is the right thing to do. Full maturity leads one to act rightly not because of any particular law or authority but because one believes it is the proper action.

Conscience is the personal awareness deep in our being that we must act in a particular fashion if we are to be true to our nature as responsible beings, if we are to become what we ought to be. In this respect, conscience is a creative response to God, not a conformist one. It is a response from one’s heart, not a response that one has received from outside of oneself, not from what others have said or written, but rather from what one has come to believe is true and right. Conscience is the person doing what one has come to see and understand is the proper thing to do.

Conscience considers the overall question, “What is the will of God for me?” To be able to respond one has to be formed by the Bible, by prayer, by the view of the community, and by the teaching authority of the church. The word conscience comes from two Latin words—“cum” meaning “with” and “scientia” meaning “knowledge”. It serves to remind us that a decision in conscience is meant to be based on what we have come to know and as a result come to believe. Someone recommended four D’s to recall the process of moral actions. It starts with “digging” for facts (what’s involved? What did Jesus say? What does the Church say? What do real friends say?) It is followed by “deliberation”, then “decision” and then “doing”.

God calls us to be faithful. We have the responsibility to be properly formed and educated so that by virtue of conscience, by virtue of who we are, we can respond in a fashion that is proper to us.