

# Formation of Conscience as Celebration of the Spirit of Christ in the Context of Everyday Life

**Paulachan Kochappilly**

Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how conscience formation engages three separate but interrelated dynamic processes: the following of Christ; the need to follow your heart; and the necessity of following the Spirit. The formation of conscience is a process where responding to the promptings of the Spirit dwells in every heart. The following of Christ is a prerequisite for the formation of conscience; it is a lively, loving, and joyful adherence to the path of the gospel of Christ. In the process of the formation of conscience, we need to purify our hearts and become like little children. And finally, ones conscience needs to seek the truth and adhere to it in the given context of life with the help the Holy Spirit.

*Keywords:* Conscience, Holy Spirit, Formation, Harmony

## **Introduction**

Moral confusion is a common phenomenon people generally confront in their everyday life. This is mostly because of the conflicting or occasionally contradictory values in the offing. In other words, such a dilemma springs because there are varied choices before the agent,

meaning the possibility of exercising one's legitimate freedom, the context of morality, is guaranteed. Some may consider this as a burden, while others think it is a blessing, for these people have the benefit and joy in exercising the moral freedom to choose from manifold options. Often such a situation arises when there is a clash between the objective standard and the subjective personal take on the norm of morality. Often it is like a walk on a tight rope between legality and morality, loyalty and liberty, fidelity and creativity, objectivity and subjectivity. It is a challenging walk in the life of a moral person to follow one's right conscience. Striking a harmony between these apparently opposites is the hallmark of such a pilgrimage. Such a walk or dialogue points to the necessity of embracing the dynamics of conscience formation leading to a righteous and virtuous life.

The discussion on conscience is found in every culture and society. In the discussion about the sources of the morality, Indian literature outlines four sources: *shruti* (Sacred Scripture), *smrti* (Remembered, Tradition), *shishta* (Good Examples), and *antaranga* (conscience). *Antaranga* means the internal forum where the moral agent is in discernment of what is good and chooses the good and avoids the evil. To have a clean and pure conscience is the task before every human being. Another term for conscience is *manasakshi*, meaning to bear witness. The phenomenon of moral dilemma is found among all people irrespective of their religious affiliations.

When the objective norm of morality is in conflict with the subjective, there arises the moral dilemma and the prick of conscience. Pope Francis informs and invites us to address the moral challenges of our time by forming our conscience, "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (AL 37). Later in the document, he advises, "Every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one's pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God's grace" (AL 303). Of course, the Pope is addressing the issues of marriage and family life. The situation is not different in other areas of Christian life.

I shall begin with a simple case. For instance, in order to avoid environmental pollution, the use of plastic is banned. Taking into

account the seriousness of the issue, a Christian religious community has introduced paper glasses for drinking. Well done. Less harm. However, such an alternative step also adds to the waste and the management of garbage. But worse is the situation when these members who have otherwise taken a bold step in curbing the use of plastics, for convenience and comfort due to ignorance and negligence. People mindlessly add to the ecological havoc and often it is created by the elite of the society, for example, when they have assembled to discuss and discern the ways and means to check the ecological crises at hand. The use of bottled water is becoming a growing trend and at times it is standard in the seminar. Most often the organizers of conferences and seminars do not notice the harm and hazard they are creating in the society. What shall we do? Are there alternatives? Is it feasible to introduce something economic and also ecologically sound and nature friendly? The confusion might be caused by the widespread use of bottled water, so why should I or we follow the principle. Does a wrong become right, because of its widespread practice? Generally speaking, people follow the trend without paying attention to the consequences of the act. In spite of the daily ecological disasters, people often blindly and conveniently forget the fundamentals in fostering harmony of life.

Conscience formation fosters harmony of life. The formation of conscience is not a singular process. Rather it engages three separate but interrelated dynamic processes: 1) Follow Christ; 2) Follow Your Heart; 3) Follow Spirit. Each of these will be presented by drawing on scriptural passages as well as recent papal texts. But first let us understand a bit better the nature of conscience and the Church's call to attend to conscience formation in all areas of our lives.

### **Follow Christ**

Formation of conscience is a lifelong process. Conscience is at work with the truth of life and its diverse manifestations. Truth is "that which is" or "that which is being unfolded" in the course of time and space. Truth liberates. Recognition of, respect for, and response to the truth is the beginning and end of right or true conscience. Search for truth is the basic characteristic of a person who is committed to the formation of conscience. A person in conversation with the realities of life may be said to be on the right track for running the race. An openness to truth,

as and when it reveals itself through the passage of time, brings persons to be simple, humble and docile. Simplicity, humility, and docility take people beyond the boundaries of human limitations and opens to them a wider horizon on life and its beauty and glory. Here faith comes to our assistance. Faith may be said to be an embrace of or a surrender to truth, which equips and enables us to experience freedom from the entanglements of a myopic vision of life. Christians are those who follow Christ and believe in Him and shape their mind in accordance with that of Christ, their Master and Saviour. Jesus revealed that He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). He also taught that “truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). Jesus invited people to be His disciples by following Him (Mt 19:31). It is not an easy task, but a challenging one, for he says in the same breath, “Take up your cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). Those who follow Jesus Christ find the truth, and it, in turn, frees them. Christians experience joy in following Christ and His Way of life. This is the first and fundamental step forward in the formation of Christian conscience. It is a matter of joy for Christians to walk the way of Christ to form their conscience; it is a celebration of living in the presence of Christ and walking before Him blamelessly, observing what He has taught in word and deed. In other words, the following of Christ is a prerequisite for the formation of conscience; it is a lively, loving, and joyful adherence to the path of the gospel of Christ.

**“Come and See”.** The disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus, “Where do you live? In response Jesus invites them to “come and see” (Jn 1:39). This is typical of his engagement with the disciples of John the Baptist. There is something new and beautiful in Jesus which draws them closer to Him. There is no compulsion, no threat, no persuasion, no insistence, and in this particular case, there is not even a promise. It is a warm welcome – hospitality – extended to the disciples. It is a sheer open invitation; they are free to accept or reject the offer. This is the prerequisite in forming a right and tender conscience; there must be a welcoming ambience and free dialogue. The disciples were free to see the context and to stay with Jesus and learn the lessons of life from Him; this is the ideal setting for any formation. The living example of Jesus captures their attention and shapes their way of being and behaving. After having lived with Jesus in His abode, the disciples bring their near and dear ones to the loving and liberating presence of Jesus.

The intimacy with the Lord, which is guaranteed by the company of Jesus, offers the disciples an opportunity to encounter the truth of their relationships and begins to shape their conscience.

**“Come and Follow me”.** Another important invitation to the rich young man is “Come and follow me” (Mt 19:21). In order to be perfect, Jesus emphasizes the importance of following Him. This episode presents the context of freedom to the young man to make a decision. There is a choice before him either to go and sell his possessions and give the money to the poor and follow Jesus, or to go his own way. If one is to be perfect, there is no other way than following Jesus Christ. This is the Christian ethos. The following of Jesus presupposes the observance of all the other laws. The young man’s conversation with Jesus is a testimony to his faithful practice of the law, including all the commandments.

The following of Jesus presents a scenario of dialogue, which is essential in the formation of conscience.<sup>1</sup> It does not happen through imposing

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<sup>1</sup> The formation of conscience takes place in the context of dialogue, involving numerous agents and events in the life of moral person within a given community. Pope Francis uses the word, “discernment” in his teaching referring to the formation of conscience, which also presupposes dialogue. Bernard Haering attests great importance of dialogical nature of conscience. He writes, “reciprocity of consciences of believers and ministers of Christ come into being and develops. They should never assume that they have nothing to learn from the ‘rest of men’”. Father Haering expands the idea in the next paragraph of his article. According to him, “While it is true that the Lord promised his Holy Spirit to the church and to her guides in a very special way, such assistance does not come in an automatic fashion, but in the measure of our docility and our fidelity to the reciprocity of consciences, in the measure of listening, learning, and even when there is need, unlearning.” B. Haering, “Reciprocity of Consciences: A Key Concept in Moral Theology,” in *History and Conscience. Studies in Honour of Sean O’Riordan CSsR*, eds. Raphael Gallagher and Brendan McConvery, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1989, p. 68. In the same article inspired by the teaching of GS 16, he underlines the need of real dialogue. “No individual and no group has a monopoly of existential truth. No one can remain faithful to conscience without joining ‘the rest of men’ in the search for more light” (p. 66). George V. Lobo illustrates the dialogical nature of conscience in his terminological clarification itself, “the word could also be understood to mean “knowing together,” or a *partnership in discerning the will of God.*” G. Lobo, *Christian Living According to Vatican II*, Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1999, 292. See also Paulachan Kochappilly, “Conscience: The Dialogical Character of Christian Ethics,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 66 (September 2002): 739-753.

one's ideas on another. Instead, the formation of conscience requires an atmosphere of exchange of views and values in the context of freedom. Such a dialogue presupposes a sincere and honest search for truth, the revelation of which takes place in the course of conversation and contemplation. The rich young man enters into a dialogue with Jesus through his question, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt 19:16). Jesus leads the young man step by step to the whole truth, or to the answers of his questions. Only in the backdrop of a continued and relentless conversation with the realities of life, the truth dawns. This showcases that there is no external pressure to conform oneself to the revealed truth. On the other hand, there is an atmosphere of freedom and the young man is left to make a personal decision to follow Jesus or not. People ask questions in order to have clarity and authenticity in doing what they are doing. In the end, the one who is making the decision might back off. There is no wonder in this. The purpose of dialogue must be to lead people to truth, goodness, and beauty, and then to free them. Indeed, Jesus was accompanying the young man in understanding him and helping him understand the essentials of eternal life, but then he left him to decide his own way.

**"Take up Your Cross and Follow me"**. Following Christ is not merely a catchword; rather, it demands a total and unconditional commitment to the Lord in one's life. It is a radical conversion to the vision and mission of the person of Jesus. It is a constant challenge throughout one's life. There is no day off from the following of Christ. Hence, Jesus told his followers, "If any want to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34). Following Christ presupposes walking the path of the Lord; it also is an invitation to carry one's cross daily. This is a wakeup call for the constant conversation with and conversion of oneself to the ideals and values of Jesus and His gospel. This is the cost of discipleship. The joy and fulfilment of life is in facing the challenges and the changes needed for living a Christian life.

In chapter three of the encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II dwells on the significance of the Cross of Christ and following Him. The pope says, "The crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; he lives it fully in the total gift of himself and calls his disciples to share in his freedom" (VS 85). Following Christ, hence, is not a

barrier to the exercise of freedom, instead it ensures the path of liberation through a self-gift. Citing Saint Paul, the pope reiterates: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). John Paul II commenting on the formation of a right conscience says, “In a positive way, the Church seeks, with great love, to help all the faithful to form a moral conscience which makes judgments and leads to decisions in accordance with the truth” (*VS* 85). In clear terms, the encyclical attests the correlation between freedom and truth, “Only the freedom which submits to the Truth leads the human person to his true good. The good of the person is to be in the Truth and to do the Truth” (*VS* 84). The Cross of Christ is the witness to real freedom and the truth. The Pope illustrates the dynamics, “Jesus, then, is the living, personal summation of perfect freedom in total obedience to the will of God. His crucified flesh fully reveals the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth, just as his Resurrection from the dead is the supreme exaltation of the fruitfulness and saving power of a freedom lived out in truth” (*VS* 87). The invitation of Jesus to “Take up the cross and follow me” becomes eloquent in reference to the truth and freedom. It is through the submission of oneself to the truth of faith, that one undergoes a self-transformation and tunes oneself in the formation of conscience. “Through the moral life, faith becomes “confession”, not only before God but also before men: it becomes witness” (*VS* 89). In this manner, faith in Christ – the following of Christ – shapes one’s conscience after the example of Jesus, for “Christ’s witness is the source, model and means for the witness of his disciples, who are called to walk on the same road” (*VS* 89). The process of the formation of conscience is made explicit by Saint Paul in his letter to the Christians of Ephesus, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2) (*VS* 89). So the Cross of Christ stands as a model and ideal for every Christian and draws the roadmap towards greater freedom and the flourishing of humanity with divinity, resplendent in Jesus Christ.

## **Follow Your Heart**

The term ‘heart’ was used in the Old Testament to signify the reality and the activity of conscience. Though the term conscience was alien to the ancient Jewish ethos, the reality of it was recognized and responded to in sacred Scripture. In such a milieu, the power of seeing, knowing and judging were attributed to the heart. Prophet Jeremiah depicts the imagery of the heart powerfully and insightfully, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33). God, the lawgiver, has written His law on the hearts of the people. This law written on the human heart is called conscience, discerning and deciding the will of God in the given situation. A thought very similar to this, but with nuances and details, we find in Prophet Ezekiel, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ezek 36:26). In this passage, there is a mention of ‘a new heart’ and ‘a new spirit’. Both heart and spirit refer to conscience, which is active and operative in discerning and observing the law of God. The classical passage on conscience is found in Saint Paul, who uses both the words, heart and conscience interchangeably:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret of all” (Rom 2:14-16).

The Magisterium follows the biblical and theological tradition in elaborating the truth of conscience. Vatican II succinctly paints the two leading imageries pertaining to conscience, namely, voice and law. “Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (*GS 16*). Conscience is considered in all these categories and imageries – heart, spirit, voice, and law – which together present a total holistic idea of conscience.



*Gaudium et Spes* articulates conscience as “man’s most secret core and his sanctuary” (*GS* 16).

*Veritatis Splendor* teaches, “The relationship between man’s freedom and God’s law is most deeply lived out in the heart” (*VS* 54). Human freedom and divine truth are not opposing realities, but they are held in unison; freedom is experienced in truth. The follower of Christ has to follow one’s heart, for God has inscribed His law on the human heart, where the voice of God echoes and the law of God is written. This is available to all people, who listen to the inner voice of God echoing in the heart and who obey the law of God. A disciple of Christ is a follower of one’s heart, tuned in to the mind and will of Christ, keeping track of the contextual challenges and changes in the society and never giving up or mitigating on matters of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

**“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God”**. In the formation of conscience, purity of heart is important and essential. The heart that sees, knows, and judges has to be purified so that the vision of God is made accessible at every moment of life and the mission of the human person becomes candid. The promise of Jesus is in place. If we keep our hearts clean and pure, seeing God and the divine design is made easier and immediate. Persons who see God with a pure heart can shape their conscience according to the divine will. Conscience is called the sanctuary of the human being, which is one’s own heart. Indeed, a sanctuary is known for the abiding presence of God. The human heart is the shrine of God. “There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths” (*GS* 16). It is not only the *darshana* (seeing) of God, but also *shravana* (listening) takes place with God in the heart. This means the *anubhava* (experience) of God is in the heart. The personal encounter or experience leads one to be and become (*Anu + bhava* = to become following something); in our case, like God. It is the contemplation of, communion in, and conversation with the Divine which shapes the heart of a person.

In the process of the formation of conscience, we need to purify our hearts and become like little children, the inheritors of the Kingdom of God. On more than one occasion, Jesus praises and thanks God for revealing the mystery of God to the infants. “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the

intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (Lk 10:21). Children are known for their innocence. They are, therefore, dear to all. Jesus also acknowledges the purity of their heart; in them there is no guile. They normally bear witness to truth, goodness, and beauty. They are simple and straightforward and they are courageous and content. Formation of conscience takes place when our hearts become pure and clean and there is nothing to hide from others. One’s life becomes an open book. This means that there is no coverup and people with purity of heart admit and appreciate the truth. This is a sine qua non for the formation of a right conscience. In order to arrive at it, we need to become childlike, putting our trust in the Lord when we face challenging circumstances. On another occasion, Jesus says: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 18:3). The matter is thus clear that purity of heart, the characteristic feature of children, is a basic disposition required for the correct formation of one’s conscience. Purity of heart is a fundamental characteristic of Jesus; He is in the presence of God throughout His earthly sojourn until his death on the cross. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). This is the path before the disciples of Christ in their pursuit of joy and bliss.

**“Let the little children come to me”.** On another occasion, Jesus showcases the importance of the purity of heart by praising the worthiness of the little children. He says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’ And he laid his hands on them and went on his way” (Mt 19:14). Children attract everyone on account of their innocence, purity, simplicity, humility, playfulness, etc.; they fill the spirit of joy and hope in the hearts of people. Jesus acknowledges and appreciates it. Let playfulness and openness be evident in our lives so that we too may experience the presence of God in our heart. The Divine Presence pervades and permeates the whole universe. We have to be aware of his presence in our midst and in our activities, for which sincerity and honesty are prerequisites.

The abiding presence of the Divine is a gift through the mystery of Emmanuel, God-with-us. There is always access to the Lord who is both the *antaryamin* (indwelling one) and the *viswayamin* (controller

of the universe). Such a transforming experience of the Lord is near to the people whose heart is pure and clean like that of children. It is an invitation to all to be at home with the overarching presence of the Lord without any hesitation. All are welcome. This is the reality and the mystery aspect of the formation of conscience, which, in essence, is the conformation to the mind of Christ our Lord.

**“Go and Do Likewise”.** Being in the company of Jesus with a pure heart is for a great mission as well. The companionship is for a commissioning, “to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mk 3:14). It is a movement of coming to, being with, going forth, and returning to the Lord. This movement we see in the case of the disciples of John the Baptist. After having received the invitation from Jesus and responding to it positively and creatively, we see them going out and bringing others into the fold of Jesus. The same is true with the Samaritan women who had a memorable encounter with the Lord; she goes forth to spread the good news of the Messiah. Such examples are numerous in the Bible. Christians are pilgrims on earth. They, therefore, have to journey: journey to the Lord and journey to the world. People having formed their conscience in the company of Jesus are a blessing and a healing presence, an extension and expansion of his merciful presence, which is a most powerful force in shaping one’s own conscience and that of others.

Through the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), Jesus draws our attention to the basics of the formation of conscience. The parable offers a framework for the critical self-scrutiny in order to be genuine and holistic in the formation of conscience. A conscience which has not imbibed the fundamental nature of God – compassion or mercy – has not yet encountered the Lord in the concrete context of misery and sinfulness. The parable is loud and clear on the matter. At the end of the story, Jesus interrogates the lawyers: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v 36) The response was evident as expected, “The one who showed him mercy” (v 37). As a conclusion, Jesus exhorts, “Go and do likewise” (v 37).

In the process of the formation of Christian conscience, being in the company of Jesus Christ, the disciples are invited to appropriate the nature of God, which is echoed in the saying of Jesus, “Love you enemies

and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). We are invited to follow the path of compassion as the mark of our communion with the Lord God. This is the touchstone of a formed conscience. It is a journey people have to undertake. If we claim that we are in the company of Jesus through a close following of the Master, the expected conversion is nothing less than showcasing the mercy of God, for the explicit teaching of the Lord is, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). We have no excuse from this bounden duty, which is a spring of joy.

### **Follow the Spirit**

Following Christ means following the Spirit of Christ, for Jesus has assured the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit on our journey, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (Jn 14:16-17). According to the promise, on the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the community of believers. The Holy Spirit is the Advocate who will be with us and abide in us. It is because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we have come to know the Father. It is because of the abiding Spirit we can call God, Abba, Father (1 Cor). Jesus makes it clear that the Spirit is truth and will lead us to all truth, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak what he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (Jn 16:13). If we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit, we will know the mind of Christ and will be in a position to judge what is right and what is erroneous. If we lend our ears and heart to the promptings of the Spirit, then we will be following the path of truth, goodness, and beauty. The presence of the Spirit in the life of persons and of the community will be like a shining star amidst the encircling gloom so that we may reach the shore of joy, peace, and hope. The Spirit is essential for the formation of conscience. We, as the followers of Christ, have to follow the Spirit of truth, who is the Advocate abiding in the depth of our being.

Jesus also promises the Spirit will make us free. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:31-32). Knowing truth and doing the truth is freedom. The Spirit helps us in our discernment on the journey. When we listen to the voice of God, that is, the voice of the indwelling Spirit in us, and obey the gospel of Christ, we are following the footsteps of Jesus and are in tune with the image of God in which we are created. This is the task of formation of conscience. The Spirit leads us to unknown mysteries, but we do not need to panic. We will be learning the skills to cope with the changing and challenging situations, but never compromising on or giving up truth, goodness, and glory.

Saint Paul testifies to the transformation of a person through the working of the Spirit, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

**Walk the Way of Truth.** Following the Spirit means walking the way of truth, because the Spirit of Christ leads us to all truth. Jesus, who revealed himself as the way, the truth, and the life is indeed the true way to life. The Holy Spirit, dwelling in us and guiding our steps, helps us in discerning truth from falsehood. The virtue of prudence is important in forming our conscience as well as in discerning the eternal from the transient. Whatever exists is real (*satyam is sahashti = that which is*). So there is a duty laid upon us to recognize, respect, and respond to all realities. In order to establish peace and harmony in our community and society, we need to walk the way of truth, justice, freedom, and charity.

In the formation of one’s conscience, one has to seek truth and adhere to it in the given context of life. All things deserve our attention, because all of them reveal and glorify God in their own way. Nothing is alien to the Christian. The image of the covenant reveals the reality and the splendour of truth. Truth may be presented as triadic in the covenantal setup: the Lord, land, and people. All these realities must be taken into account in the formation of conscience. The community consciousness of the covenant must be nurtured and fostered in the process of formation. In the wake of the ecological crisis, the earth and ecosystem should be part of the programme in forming one’s conscience. We can never be insensitive to changing and challenging realities of

the world. A recognition of interconnectivity and interrelationship of all things – natural ecology, human ecology, social ecology – are to be revered, for everything is governed by a web of relationships. All the relationships, beginning with the personal, physical, spiritual, familial, social, ecclesial, national, international, and leading to cosmic and eschatological relationships have a role in the formation of conscience.

Saint Paul puts it eloquently, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-28). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul shows us the meaning of putting on Christ. “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3:12-13). All the above virtues make the garb of Christ. These dispositions and attitudes must be taken into consideration in the formation of one’s conscience. That is to say, the thinking, the talking and the walking of a Christian is to be guided and governed by one reality, that is, we are one in Christ and we should shape our conscience akin to that of Jesus Christ.

**Walk the Way of Goodness.** The rich young man in Matthew 19:16-22 asks a pertinent question, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” (v 16). This passage presupposes a general understanding of good in the society. Nevertheless, since he has found a good teacher in the person of Jesus, the young man wants to discover the details and nuances of what is good. Taking a cue from the question of the rich young man, who represents any young person of our times, John Paul II states, “People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil” (VS 8).

We can, in general, say that which pleases creation, others, and God is good. The quest and thirst of a person should not be to do good only for oneself, ignoring the good of other realities; instead, everyone should be eager to embrace and do the good, which pleases others and oneself as well. In the formation of one’s conscience, a person has to walk the

way of ensuring the good of all, which also ensures one's own goodness and happiness.

The simple litmus test for the verification of good is available in the Judgment of the Nations recounted in Matthew 25: 31-46. "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (v34-36). It is simple and profound truth that there are many who are in need and are in need of our presence and assistance. If we open our eyes and look around we can see people are in need of material, spiritual, psychological, intellectual, religious, ethical support and guidance. Jesus reminds us about the truth of human solidarity and commands: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (v 40). The command of Jesus, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37) is only reiterating the teaching of Jesus to follow the path of goodness.

In view of protecting, preserving, and promoting life, the values and virtues of justice, freedom, identity, dignity, equality, solidarity, and charity have to find their reverberation in the society. In his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggeman makes a compelling case for our serious consideration in order to set life flowing and flourishing. He is of the opinion that an economics of affluence, the politics of oppression, and a religion of immanence rampant in our society should be critiqued in forming our conscience. In other words, we need to walk the way of life through a critical and energizing imagination.

The Ten Commandments set the scene for being and doing good. All civil and ecclesiastical laws are to protect and promote the life of all, especially the weaker section of society. Obedience to the law is necessary for an ordered societal life. And observance of good customs and practices make the celebration of life possible. Jesus said that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfil the law. Law is in view of life and its celebration. Therefore, those who are on the journey of forming their conscience, have to attend to the obligation laid upon them by diverse laws, precepts, and rules. Whatever is legal need not necessarily

be moral. Only whatever is morally good and acceptable should be adhered to with awe and respect.

**Walk the Way of Beauty.** Values are caught rather than taught. Life is a gift and it is beautiful. And we need to celebrate life so that those who see people celebrating may be attracted to the source and summit of life. Jesus taught his disciples, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). The experience of joy, happiness, and bliss is a sufficient reason to follow the path of beauty, which attracts all and assimilates the values and virtues from within on a note of celebration.

We believe that we are created in the image and likeness of God. The image of God – love, life, light – has been always beautiful and it attracts the imagination of people. Since we are the image of God, effort should be made enhance the beauty of this image so that we might give glory to God and attract many more to the path of the Lord. By forming one’s conscience moral persons are contributing to the shining of this already beautiful image of God in and through their life and activities. Saint Paul attests great significance to the image of Christ in his reflection on the image of God, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:15-16). The challenge before Christians is to become another Christ. The Christians form their conscience in the Kindergarten of Christ, putting on His vision, values, and virtues, so that they may be shining stars in the firmament of God and the joyful little children in the garden of God.

The beauty of life is in its celebration. To celebrate our life in Christ is to translate the dreams of Jesus into the life of Christians. We are the salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:13-14). In imbibing the spirit of salt and light, we will be giving taste and sight to millions of people. The taste of salt is shared only when it defuses itself in the food. It is the same with a lamp that gives light; the oil runs out in order to make the life of people bright and beautiful. Forming of conscience demands such self-giving in order to enlighten, empower, and enrich the lives of others.



Love, life and light should be seen and celebrated in the life of the faithful in the world. Creation is the celebration of God's love. The mystery of the Incarnation is the celebration of divine love. The Paschal Mystery is the celebration of God's love for humanity. Celebration generates life. Life makes celebration possible. Love brings people together for celebration. And indeed, celebration of love and life unfolds in the light of God. Jesus invites each one of his disciples to follow the path of light, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). In this invitation, Jesus wants us to share in his joy of the light of life. The creative love of God, the redemptive life of God, and the renewing light of the Spirit – the Mystery of the Holy Trinity – will accompany and abide in the followers of Christ and help them form their conscience.

It is encouraging to see the focus of Pope Francis on joy through his magisterium, which is another name for beauty: *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), *The Joy of Love* (2016), *The Joy of Truth* (2017), and *Rejoice and Be Glad* (2018). The Holy Father presents the message of Christ in a beautiful garb to attract people to the wellspring of joy, the characteristic of Christian life. Take note of the opening sentences of his magisterium, "The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus" (*EG* 1); "The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church" (*AL* 1); "The Joy of Truth expresses the restlessness of the human heart until it encounters and dwells within God's Light, and shares that Light with all people" (*VG* 1). This joy of Christ should permeate the hearts of Christians and shape their conscience. The opening sentence of the document *Christus Vivit* is beautiful and challenging, "Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life" (*CV* 1). We are reminded time and again of the necessity to regain and reclaim the joy of being a Christian.

## Conclusion

As we have shown, conscience formation engages three separate but interrelated dynamic processes: the following of Christ; the need to follow your heart; and the necessity of following the Spirit. The following of Christ prepares the ground for the formation of conscience. Imbued with the values and virtues of the gospel of Christ equips and enables

one to follow one's heart in deciding good from evil. The formation of conscience is a process of responding to the promptings of the Spirit dwelling in every heart. There is no holiday for conscience. As breath is essential to sustain life, so is conscience, vigilant and vibrant in every moment of life. Conscience is always in conversation. It is a lifelong conversation leading to conversion and communion with God, and it illumines the mind to discern and empowers the heart to decide and dedicate oneself to truth, goodness, and beauty.

The formation of a good conscience is a pressing need of our time. Persons immersed in the Spirit of Christ will follow Christ by walking the way of truth, goodness, and beauty. I would like to conclude this reflection with the exhortation of Saint Paul to the Church in Ephesus:

Therefore, take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6:13-17).

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