

Private Conscience and the Church

By Father John Catoir JCD - Oct. 21, 2017

The late Bishop Fulton Sheen explained that there are two kinds of truths: “Outer truths, which we master, like the distance of the sun from the earth; and inner truths, which master us; for example: God is merciful to the penitent. Inner truths affect a person’s destiny, like a vocational calling; they are matters of conscience.”

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council defined conscience as “the most secret core and sanctuary of the person, where alone with God, in one’s innermost self, each one perceives the voice of God.”

Now consider this, if a couple, after much prayer and sincere reflection, considered themselves to be truly married in the eyes of God, but many others considered them to be living in sin, would you judge them to be sinners? Or would you give them the benefit of the doubt? Pope Francis once said, “Who am I to judge,” and he disturbed a lot of people.

The Church has always taught the primacy of conscience. The law is the remote norm of morality, while the individual conscience is considered the proximate norm. This traditional teaching of moral theology has certain consequences; for instance, a law does not bind in conscience until the individual knows it exists, and until he or she accepts it as objectively true and morally binding. There is such a thing as licit dissent.

The American hierarchy issued a pastoral letter entitled “Human Life in Our Day,” (November 15, 1968). Here is a pertinent excerpt: “There exists in the Church a lawful freedom of inquiry, of thought, and general norms of licit dissent... In the final analysis, no person is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his/her conscience, as the moral tradition of the Church attests.”

In doubtful matters, Catholics should be guided by the teaching authority of the Church, which is referred to as the Magisterium. What exactly does that mean? At the 1991 workshop for the hierarchy, theologian Avery Dulles, SJ, who later became a Cardinal, explained it this way. “The Magisterium is one, but only one informant of conscience.

In matters of individual conscience Catholics have the right to examine all available information in forming their conscience.” This teaching is not new.

There has always been an emphasis on God’s mercy in the teaching of the Church. Jesus said, “Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”-Matthew 9:13.

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”-John 3:17.

Pope Francis has been emphasizing mercy quite a bit. To some, he seems to be breaking the rules. The truth is, he has been manifesting the Spirit of Jesus, who excoriated the Pharisees of old. Here’s what Jesus said, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you will not lift a finger to help them.”-Luke 11:46.

The Pope’s canonical critics demand greater rigidity. Are they wise? I think not. In view of the fact that Jesus issued this command: “Judge not that you be not judged,” wouldn’t it make more sense if these papal critics calmed down, and left the matter of judging souls to God.

Divine Mercy is something we’re all going to need one day. Better to be safe than sorry.

May the Lord be your strength and your joy.