

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

CONSCIENCE

Follow your conscience. Good advice. Even the Catechism of the Catholic Church says “In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right.” (#1778) If you can get past the oppressive, sexist language (and I understand if you can’t – I can barely read, let alone type, this deliberate, in-your-face, unnecessary, never-ending, female-bashing verbal assault), it says that all of us must follow what we know to be just and right.

For example, my informed conscience boisterously insists that I publicly condemn this infuriating sexist language because I know this opposition is just and right.

When you read paragraphs 1776 through 1802 (just a few pages, actually) of the Catechism, you will find a good summary of the Church’s teaching on conscience. It is pretty radical and worth reading.

It also references the famous quote from Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: “Conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.” (GS 16) (Again, apologies for the sexist language)

Anyway, here’s my question: what would the Vatican Church be like today if there was a primary emphasis on this teaching about conscience instead of the current preoccupation with anti-abortion, anti-gay, and other sexually related issues?

My guess is that we would have a very different Church experience.

That switch in emphasis is possible because it is a choice. Everyone is a cafeteria Catholic because there are so many dimensions to Catholicism that no one can give equal attention to all of them. Everyone, Pope and Vaticanistas included, choose their priorities, what they consider to be the most important items among thousands of issues and beliefs which make up Catholicism.

It is destructively bizarre that a presumably celibate hierarchy chooses sex related issues (contraception, abortion, and homosexuality) as the centerpiece of their public message. Stephen Colbert, on his *Colbert Report*, recently asked Sr.

Simone Campbell, "What in the world does a nun know about sex?" She had a great response but here is another good answer: "Probably a little more than a celibate hierarchy."

If the Church focused on its teaching about conscience instead of sex, I believe we would have:

- More Catholics. As people are taught and encouraged to search and develop their conscience, they assume more personal responsibility for their faith journey. They also see the Church as a community that helps them form that conscience and make those decisions, without judgment. Now, many of them perceive the Church as an institution that tells them what to think, feel, and do, and what is right and wrong. You are not welcome if you think, feel or do what the institution tells you is wrong. So, many of them leave. With an emphasis on conscience more of them would stay, and many more people in society would be attracted to Catholicism.
- A more pastoral hierarchy. The hierarchy would be more responsive to the personal, pastoral condition of the People of God. There would be less condemnation and more compassion. There would be a very different type of personality selected for bishop. Parish pastoral experience and success would be a primary asset, instead of the current liability, when choosing pastors to become bishops. This "tone" of leadership would change everything about the public perception of Popes, Bishops and priests.
- More collegiality. With an emphasis on the primacy of conscience, there would be more inclusiveness because people would be more inclined to respect the conscience of other people and respect the differences that now divide them. There would be no need to resort to a contorted parody of "religious liberty" to deny legitimate health care insurance coverage for employees of Catholic institutions.
- More ecumenical dialogue with other denominations, faiths, and the unchurched. When the teaching on conscience is center stage, there is more openness to other beliefs, more acceptance of different faith journeys and less need to insist on personally held belief structures.
- What other consequences do you see? Add your own.

Please note: in this chat, I am not talking about changing any of our teachings about conscience, abortion, homosexuality, contraception, or sex in general. I am merely suggesting a change in emphasis, a restructuring of our priorities.

On the other hand, I am screeching loudly (hear it?) to annihilate the sexist language, once and for all, in all things Catholic. My conscience tells me so.