

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year C
“Living a Catholic Conscience”

Through the Words of the Gospel, May Our Sins be Wiped Away

Holy Spirit, Help Me to Preach with Great Clarity and Great Charity

In February 1943, Franz Jagerstatter, husband and father of three young daughters, was called to fight for his country as a German soldier. Even though his own pastor, other priests, and the bishop of Linz, Austria, urged him to comply and serve with the Nazis, Franz refused to take the oath of loyalty to Adolph Hitler and was imprisoned. When his own army attorney tried to convince Franz to fight for the Nazi cause by arguing that other Catholics were doing so, Franz responded, “I can only act on my own conscience.... I have considered my family. I have prayed and put myself and my family in God’s hands. I know that, if I do what I think God wants me to do, He will take care of my family.” Obeying a conscience which he had spent a lifetime forming in accordance with Catholic teaching, on August 9th, 1943, Franz was beheaded and cremated as an enemy of Nazi Germany.

In today’s first reading, Moses proclaims that the voice of the Lord, our God, is very near to us, already in our mouths and in our hearts. Because each of us is made in the image and likeness of God, His law for us—the law of human nature—is imprinted into our very being, and Moses teaches that we must abide by and adhere to that law. When we do so, when we properly form and obey our conscience, as Franz Jagerstatter demonstrated so well, it is then that we heed the voice of the Lord.

Our conscience is one of the most awesome gifts given to each of us by God. But there is a great deal of confusion in the world today about what a conscience is and what it means to follow one's conscience. So let's overcome this confusion.

As Catholics who belong to the Church to whom the Holy Spirit has revealed the fullness of truth, we understand that our conscience is the voice deep within us that helps us to know right from wrong and how to act on that knowledge. Conscience is a room into which only two beings will ever enter—you and your God. It is through our conscience that God helps us to know the natural law inscribed by Him in each of our hearts and the way we must obey that law. It is here that God reveals to your mind His truth and encourages you to act on that truth with your own free will. In an upright conscience, that is a conscience formed by the teachings of Holy Mother Church as given to her by the Holy Spirit, we can hear God's voice at all times—it speaks about things we are considering doing, what we are doing, and what we have done. To hear our voice of conscience, we must practice interiority—being still and praying about what God wants. Once God speaks to you through your conscience, the choice in how you act is now entirely yours and God will not make your choices for you. Your free will chooses God, or it rejects God. It is precisely that you *are* capable of making this choice that God has given you a conscience.

When a person's conscience is formed properly, he is able to make holy decisions, decisions in keeping with what God desires. But an improperly formed conscience leads to sinful choices. This is what we see so clearly in today's Gospel reading.

The Gospel of Luke has been known in Church Tradition as "The Gospel of Mercy," because Luke in particular emphasizes Jesus' teachings on mercy, compassion, and love of neighbor. When they encounter a brother Jew half-dead along the roadside, both the priest and the Levite, who are bound by God's law to help this fellow son of Israel, refuse to do so, demonstrating their failure to form their consciences in keeping with God's Divine Will. But ironically the Samaritan, who would have looked upon the victim as a hated enemy, is the one who shows us the face of Christ. His conscience revealed to him that mercy imposes the obligation to love and do good to one's enemies, even if he didn't necessarily *feel* good about that enemy.

Through this Gospel, the Holy Spirit teaches that we must never follow an unformed conscience. Rather, a Christian must follow a conscience formed by the Word of God, the gifts of the Spirit, and the authoritative teaching of the one true Church. What we should never allow, as many of the saints have taught us, is to let our conscience be directed by our own desires, our personal tastes or our emotions. In fact, as St. Philip Neri puts it so bluntly, "There is nothing more dangerous than

to direct one's own conscience." And St. Frances Xavier Cabrini proclaims, "Liberty of conscience is a diabolical interpretation."

What are these saints driving at? The fact that we must be obedient to Church teaching to assure we are following our Lord. Church teaching is the law of the Lord, and as the Psalmist tells us today, that law is perfect, trustworthy, right, clear, pure and true. Without consciences properly formed by the Catholic faith in accordance with God's law, people *disregard the truth* and make erroneous choices, oftentimes so they can avoid conflict with others or so they can create a courteous atmosphere of getting along. In other words, they prefer not to follow God's law if that means "rocking the boat" and challenging the culture when the culture acts contrary to the law of the Lord.

And that is exactly the situation we find ourselves in today. There is a trustworthy body of recent research which tells us that only six percent of adults in America have a biblical worldview—that is their lifestyle and their decisions are driven by biblical principles—by their understanding of what God wants and expects related to their lives. The people who dominate our culture's most important means of moral propaganda—the mass media, Hollywood, TV shows, the popular music industry, higher education, and public schools—are atheists or near-atheists. They attack truth and God's laws, and every day they seek to damage authentic Christianity and what they consider its "outdated" biblical beliefs and morality.

Western culture has largely forgotten God and we have failed to form our consciences in accord with His laws. And having forgotten God, our culture has plainly set itself up in opposition to God. In this setting, “conscience” has been misconstrued to become the bulwark of so-called “freedom” against any limitations imposed by God’s authority and the teachings of His Church. This mindset has led without doubt to the conclusion that there is no objective truth and that the teachings of the Church, especially in the area of morality, are either incorrect or only “aids” to the determination of right and wrong. The proper understanding of conscience has been warped, and the false appeal to “follow your conscience” has been used to consider only one’s own desires and exempt oneself from following the Church’s moral teaching. But the Church is the teacher of God’s universal truths binding upon the consciences of all men, and to ignore her teaching is to exclude God’s Divine Will from our choices.

A perfect example of this is a lie which has spread like wildfire in our culture over the past few years. This is a lie which Pope Francis himself has proclaimed to be demonic because it opposes the order of God’s creation. This is the lie of gender ideology. Casting reason aside and letting themselves be governed by their emotions and feelings, there are those in our culture who have decided they’re going to ignore the gender they were born with and live as the opposite sex because that’s the way they think it should be. This means that a man can decide he’s a woman even if he’s

biologically male, and we have an obligation to recognize him as a female, albeit with a man's body. Mr. Jones is now Miss Jones, and if you ever call him "he," you're considered a closed-minded, hateful person. Gender ideology is an imaginary, pathological worldview, a denial of reality and a failure to make proper use of the intellect to conform one's thinking to what is true. A properly-formed conscience, a conscience formed in accordance with God's natural law and the teachings of His Church, teachings which have remain unchanged for 2,000 years and are unchangeable, recognizes that there are only two genders and every person is given their gender by God at the moment of conception. Regardless of the manner in which a man dresses, acts, or even alters his body, he cannot change the gender given him by God. There is no such thing as a "transsexual" or "transgender" person, because God's creation is inviolable and is not subject to any human change. You are born a man or a woman, and you will die the same—and nothing can change that.

Our culture has embraced the error of gender ideology so fully that now there are serious efforts to indoctrinate our children to believe this falsehood. Through messages presented in children's television shows, in many of our public schools, and in events like drag queen story hours in public libraries, the effort is being made to pervert our children into believing that gender is fluid and can be changed if one decides for any reason it should be. As Doctor of the Church St. Alphonsus Maria

Liguori puts it so well, “If you take away obedience to the Church, there is no error which will not be embraced.”

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus is tested by a biblical scholar and a professional teacher of the Jewish law. How many are those today, who claiming to be experts in various fields or following the guidance of such experts, challenge what the Holy Spirit has taught through His Church for 2,000 years regarding the fact that it is God who makes us either male or female. How many have been led astray from choices to live in conformity with the gender given them by God, choices that would bring peace in this life and eternity with God in the next, and instead, following consciences not formed in conformity with God’s law, follow movements like gender ideology that could permanently stain their souls. These are the stripped, beaten and half-dead victims in our culture today. Stripped of true wisdom, beaten by the lies of our sick culture, half-dead in that they are not enlightened by the law of our all-knowing God. And these are the victims that Jesus proclaims in today’s Gospel toward which *we must never discriminate* but instead show His compassion.

To proclaim the truth is to be compassionate and to act with mercy. The highest charity we owe to another person is to remind him or her of what is true. To affirm someone suffering from gender dysphoria is a profound mistake and is not an act of love nor a Christian duty, but rather is an affirmation of a pathological error that the confused brother or sister has entered into. God, and not the culture, decides

what we are to believe and how we are to live. It is always the first mission and task of each of us to preach the Gospel. And this includes a task to drive out demons, so to speak, by confronting evil on its own terms, recognizing it to be evil through consciences formed by the teachings of the Church, and then taking steps to overcome that evil. If someone is propagating errors, then we identify those errors and tell people, most especially the children we are responsible for raising up to be Christian disciples, not to follow those errors. We each have the duty to confront debauched behavior, distorted ideologies, and rampaging evil. Saints have always taken on the epochal sin that loomed directly before them. Our own valor and willingness to suffer for our Lord will be evidenced in our pushing back against the sin of our time. This is the most vivid testimony to the authentic, selfless, self-sacrificing love that our faith calls from us in today's Gospel. Martyrdom for today's Christian is a single event—the fight against this seismic ideological upheaval of morality in today's culture, evidenced by ideologies such as gender affirmation care and sex transitions. We understand that by following consciences formed by God's law through the teachings of the Church, there are many in this world who will alienate and even hate us for believing in God's governance of His creation. But we also know that by being faithful to God and His Church, we will know the peace that Christ won by the blood of His Cross, the holy blood which St. Paul so eloquently describes in today's second reading. When we approach to receive our Lord Body,

Blood, Soul and Divinity in Holy Eucharist, we vow that we are in communion with His Church and *all* of her teachings, even those we find most difficult.

In order to speak truthfully, our conscience must be formed in accordance with God's law, both His natural law and the law He has revealed through the teachings of the Church. We must make the effort to develop and feed our consciences by praying with Sacred Scripture, learning our Catechism, and studying the writings of the saints and magisterial teaching. If we find that our conscience disagrees with Church teaching, we need to pray for the grace to submit ourselves and the grace for understanding, while studying the reason why the Church teaches what she does. We must follow the guidance and humility of our Blessed Mother Mary, whose very last words in Sacred Scripture were, "Do whatever He tells you." Conscience does not give us the power to decide what is right and good but the ability to discern it. The norms of our life lie outside of us, and in order to live in the light of truth—to live in reality—we must seek to acknowledge God's norms and to abide in them, and to resist the temptation to follow the culture and our own desires.

As we face the pressure to conform to the lies of our culture, let us turn to holy men like Blessed Franz Jagerstatter for guidance and inspiration. When all of those around him, including many in the Catholic Church, betrayed our Lord and tried to convince Franz to swear allegiance to Adolph Hitler and fight for Nazi Germany, this Catholic stalwart trusted in his conscience—formed by authentic Catholic

teaching—and stood firm in his convictions. During Holy Week of 1943, he wrote this to his wife, “Easter is coming and, if it should be God’s will that we can never again in this world celebrate Easter together in our intimate family circle, we can still look ahead in the happy confidence that, when the eternal Easter morning dawns, no one in our family circle shall be missing—so we can then be permitted to rejoice together forever.” After his example, let us make every effort to form our consciences properly, let us help others to do so, and let us stand against our culture when it seeks to coerce us into sinful beliefs and actions. Then we will have obeyed our Lord’s command to be merciful. Let us look to saints like Franz Jagerstatter and “Go and do likewise.”