



## Making Truthful Choices of Conscience

***"Accepting or rejecting a temptation to serious wrongdoing like abortion involves our hearts in a far deeper way than many of the lesser decisions we have to make each day, so that in the end, it is our moral choices that define who we are and what we become."***



One recurrent theme in bioethical discussions is the idea that each of us possesses a basic awareness of the moral law. This distinctly human faculty, which Western culture has referred to as "conscience," helps us to choose correctly when confronted with basic moral decisions. Even children, when taught about right and wrong, instinctively seem to recognize a law higher than themselves. Deep within our conscience we discover a law that we have not laid upon ourselves but which he must obey. Conscience has been aptly described as man's most secret core and his sanctuary.

As creatures of conscience, then, we are moved to pursue good and to avoid evil. Yet, in our fallen nature, we are also drawn, mysteriously, towards wrong and harmful choices. The dictates of conscience may become muted or drowned out by other voices around us. As we grow older we may even acquire a certain finesse in justifying personal choices that are not good, choices strongly contrary to the law of our own being. The inner sanctuary of conscience is delicate and easily transgressed, requiring great attentiveness on our part if we are to remain faithful to it.

I recall a powerful story about conscience involving a young cou-

ple who cohabitated for many years. Neither of them were thinking much about marriage, and one day the fellow learned that his girlfriend was pregnant. Being Catholic, he approached his priest. All three of them met one afternoon, had rather lengthy discussions, and finally reached a decision together. They decided that abortion was not an option. They talked about the possibility of marriage at some time in the near future.

Later the same day, the parents of the young woman came by the couple's house. They had been fairly open and accepting of this 'live-in' situation. Over dinner it came out that she was pregnant. Things changed as a result of this revelation. After the meal, the mother pulled her daughter aside and said,

"Look, you've got a life to live. You don't want to spend the rest of your life with this guy. C'mon, dear, you've got to get an abortion."

The next day, the young man and the young woman ran into the priest again. The fellow brought up the discussion with the mother and said they were

# Making Sense of Bioethics

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reconsidering the abortion option. The priest replied, "We reached a decision on that already." The young man quickly answered, "What do you mean? If I make a decision today, I can change it tomorrow." The priest responded simply, "For certain kinds of decisions, you can't change your mind. If you go back on your decision now, *I won't know who you are anymore...*"

The young man was shaken by this answer, but when he reflected on it later, he understood that the priest was right. Certain kinds of personal choices touch us at the very core of our being. Accepting or rejecting a temptation to serious wrongdoing like abortion involves our hearts in a far deeper way than many of the lesser decisions we have to make each day, so that in the end, it is our moral choices that define who we are and what we become. By acting against an upright conscience, we violate and disfigure who we are, becoming less human. That's why the priest told the young man that he would not know *who he was* anymore.

I recall another true story about the gentle proddings of conscience that involved a mom with three children. When she found out she was pregnant yet again, she became fear-

ful and began telling herself she couldn't support the burden of another child. She finally decided it would be necessary to have an abortion. She arrived at her decision just before going in for her next checkup. The doctor, unaware of her plans, began a routine ultrasound to find out how the pregnancy was progressing. She had brought along her three children, and they were busy playing together on the floor of the examination room. As the doctor ran the scanner over her belly, her little son glanced up from his toy airplanes, pointed to the screen and said, "Look, Mommy — a baby!" She left the doctor's office that afternoon with a new awareness that she couldn't end the growing life within her.

Through the eyes and heart of a child we are often reminded of what a pure and upright conscience ought to look like. To form our conscience as adults means to learn virtue, by repetitively and determinately choosing what is good and true. Doing so brings order to our lives and engenders peace in our hearts. Ultimately, we discover how to be fully human only to the extent that we faithfully follow that delicate voice of a properly-formed conscience.

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