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Forming the Conscience of Young Vietnamese

by

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A Pastoral Synthesis Project presented to the

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PRELUDE

According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, conscience is a particular manifestation of moral judgment of whether one's actions are in conformity with God's Law¹. However, certain societal influences (e.g., individualism, materialism, and relativism) are moving people away from this traditional understanding with an underlying philosophy that the totality of the human being must be first considered. This includes the spiritual, physical, psychological, and emotional dimensions, in light of social and cultural environmental influences. This perspective attributes to conscience a decisive role, and not a judgmental one, which deviates from the traditional teaching of the Church. In addition, these current trends also emphasize that conscience must have the authority to make decisions subjectively, while ignoring the role of judgment in accordance with objective truths. The Church has determined that the role of conscience is to judge what is good and what is bad when properly formed in light of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Separating conscience from objective moral principles and considering this separation prior to any kind of law is particularly dangerous leading to an erroneous conscience. A separation of this nature might allow someone to even consider what is intrinsically evil according to Church teachings (e.g., abortion, transgender, same-sex marriage).

Young people in Vietnam are living in an environment of atheism which overly exalts individual freedom and overly focuses on the opinion of the individual as the basis for evaluating the value of life. Dignity is no longer judged according to objective truths, but rather subjectively. For example, people in Vietnam are willing to have an abortion because they view the preborn child as negatively affecting their career, work life, or personal image. They are not

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 1778.

interested in examining their conscience but instead look for ways to benefit themselves; they forsake justice and love, eagerly destroying the lives of others for their own sake.

The young people of Vietnam are convincing themselves that there is neither truth nor falsity in anything. Therefore, many of the youth believe that if something feels good, they should go ahead and do it. Such sentiments are dangerous by hindering one from seeing the true human dignity of others. Thus, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has recognized that many present issues in society are distorting and disorienting the conscience of young people. This has raised the need for better formation of conscience based on the moral principles of the Catholic faith. Educating young people to see themselves as God's children by forming their conscience is an urgent obligation for the Vietnamese Catholic Church, because erroneous judgments in the misinformed conscience of young people have increased.

CASE COMPONENT

In 2021, two young drug addicts, Hoang Nguyen (14 years old) and Thai Tran (15 years old) in my parish, killed a twelve-year-old girl to steal her necklace. The crime rate of young people in Vietnam has seriously risen in recent year. According to journalist Le Tu, whose report is also substantiated by the Ministry of Public Security, there were many robberies and murder cases in 2020 with the crime rate rising to 5.2% for people under 14 years old, 24.5% for people from 14 to 16 years old, and 70.3% for people from 16 to 18 years old.² Surprisingly, while the perpetrators are teenagers who are still very young, their criminal acts are extremely brutal. For example, in November 2020, Khuong Van A. (18 years old), Khuong Hoang H. (15 years old),

² Le Tu, "Khi Tội Phạm Ngày Càng... Trẻ," at Nhan Dan (accessed October 30, 2019), <https://nhandan.com.vn>.

and Khuong Van Kh. (16 years old), killed Mrs. Hoa, a 65 years old woman, in order to steal her money and her two cellphones.³

Even more disturbing is the high abortion rate for young women in Vietnam. According to statistics from the Ministry of Health of Vietnam, Vietnam has about 250,000-300,000 abortions each year. Among these abortions, approximately 180,000-200,000 cases are students between fifteen and nineteen years old.⁴ The rationale for most of these abortions is that the state allows it, which leads citizens to not feel guilty about such acts since they are legal. Eighteen-year-old Dieu Trinh has had three abortions already. When I asked her, do you think abortion is a serious crime? She quickly replied “no” without any remorse. She thought that the state would not allow the procedure if it was criminal. These examples show that the conscience of Vietnamese young people, influenced by contemporary thought, is moving people away from the Church positions further undermining the respect for human life because of certain laws and public policies.

CONTEXT COMPONENT

Rise of Communism & Decline of Buddhist Culture

Before 1975, the Vietnamese people enjoyed a communal sense of life and overall respect for human dignity.⁵ They upheld the sense of responsibility of individuals to the community through their connections with each other. They cared about the common good and

³ Viet Huong, “Trẻ vị thành niên phạm tội – vì đâu nên nỗi?” at Thanh Hoa (accessed January 14, 2020), <https://baothanhhoa.vn>.

⁴ Liem Thanh Nguyen, “Thực Trạng Nạn Phá Thai Ở Giới Trẻ Hiện Nay Tại Việt Nam,” at Durex (accessed December 31, 2018), www.durexvietnam.vn.

⁵ Thanh Chuc, “Lễ Đạo Tình Người,” at VIETBAO (accessed March 3, 2020), <https://vnm.vietbao.com>.

avoided doing things that harmed one another. Their lives were full of love, which was reflected in a harmonious dynamic communal lifestyle and relationships.

Moral issues that disrupted communal harmony, such as abortion, were basically nonexistent then.⁶ However, in recent years, the Vietnamese people have been devastated by an environment of atheism cultivated by Communism. As Tran Quoc Thuan, the deputy director of the National Assembly Office, stated, “the biggest thing that young people are currently losing is morality. They live in the same society, where they must lie to each other to live. Lying has become a daily habit within Vietnamese society and has led to a great deal of immoral behavior. This is a danger to the young people of our country.”⁷

The Vietnamese people have lost their sense of morality due to Communism. This is demonstrated in a recent story where a father and a grandfather raped their child/grandchild, which previous to 1975 was unthinkable.⁸ Furthermore, Dr. Trang Van Mac explains, “Communism destroys national values and cultural traditions of the nation. It pushes society to decline in people's ideology, morality, and beliefs.”⁹ Communism has been causing destruction to the values of its citizens. The purpose of the Communist Party of Vietnam “is not to worry about social governance and bring happiness to the people, but only to focus on their own interests.”¹⁰ Communism promotes atheism, which results in a lack of a sense of moral values or consequences. Thus, the party does what benefits itself, without adverting to the effects on others.

⁶ Phuong Nam, “Xây dựng đạo đức, lối sống con người Việt Nam,” at PhuongNam (accessed March 22, 2021), <https://phuongnam.vanhoavaphattrien.vn>.

⁷ Tran Quoc Thuan, “Cơ Chế Nảy Sinh Nói Dối Hàng Ngày,” at THANHNIEN (accessed May 20, 2006), <https://thanhvien.vn>.

⁸RFA, “Vấn nạn xã hội Việt Nam dưới sự lãnh đạo toàn diện của Đảng Cộng sản,” at Dai A Chau Tu Do (accessed September 8, 2020), <https://www.rfa.org>.

⁹ RFA, “Vấn nạn xã hội Việt Nam dưới sự lãnh đạo toàn diện của Đảng Cộng sản”.

¹⁰ RFA, “Vấn nạn xã hội Việt Nam dưới sự lãnh đạo toàn diện của Đảng Cộng sản”.

Vietnamese culture has also been influenced by Buddhism. Through this philosophy, a person's heart, sincerity, and truth are considered the most valuable. The compassion of Buddhism has penetrated the hearts of the Vietnamese people.¹¹ Vietnamese culture emphasizes respecting the elderly, and each individual family unit helps to build a cohesive society. This is done by caring about one another and supporting family members during difficult times in life. However, even these cultural assets have been destroyed through the dismantling of cultural values. Today's reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture that denies solidarity and, in many cases, takes the form of a "culture of death."¹²

Secularism, Individualism, and Relativism

Secularism affects areas such as humanism, psychology, society, culture, and religion, and even attempts to degrade the moral theology of the Church.¹³ Secularism has two main characteristics: First, it requires self-determination in the way one thinks and lives, in religious moral norms, and in metaphysical principles. Second, it asserts that human beings only need the principles and norms that guide the moral life individually. Although secularism does not deny religion, it clearly separates all forms of religion from human social life (VS 88). The common belief is that everyone must be "free" in one's convictions. Therefore, religion is only a matter of personal privacy (VS 88). As a result of secularism, God has been removed from the world. Without religion, a person ceases to understand himself amidst the "right to self-knowledge."

¹¹ Thien Hoang, "Ảnh hưởng của văn hóa nước ngoài trên văn hóa Việt Nam," at *GiaoXuDongTri* (accessed June 15, 2017), <https://giaoxudongtri.com>.

¹² Pope John Paul II, Encyclical on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995), §12, <https://www.vatican.va>.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical on the Splendor of Truth *Veritatis splendor* (August 6, 1993), §55, <https://www.vatican.va>.

Worldwide, people struggle with knowing who they are, where they come from, or where they are going (VS 84). This is apparent in Vietnam as well.

Within the education sector, people create fake diplomas and offer financial bribes to teachers in exchange for good grades.¹⁴ In 2020, thirteen teachers in Hoa Binh province received money from parents to improve their children's scores on the high school graduation exam. Particularly, Do Manh Tuan, Vice Principal of Lac Thuy High School, received 300 million VND from Ho Chuc to raise the score for two students of his school.¹⁵ Cheating has become a habit of many people in Vietnam; according to Doctor of Science Tran Ngoc Them, the habit of lying in Vietnamese society today is 81%. For young people, the percentage of young people who lied to their parents was 22% of primary school students, 50% of middle school students, 64% of high school students and 80% of university students.¹⁶ According to the Institute of Education Research and Development, students' ethical violations are quite serious: 8% of primary school students have cheated on exams, 55% of high school students, and high school students is 60%.¹⁷ Young people live in an environment steeped in lies, and as a result, many have been negatively affected. As we observe the youth today, we find that many of them no longer feel the urge of their conscience to guide them in doing good and avoiding evil. They act without any concern for morality. They no longer even value morality and truth in their lives. They are gradually no longer following the guidance of their parents and grandparents. They have been losing "the heart of Buddhism" in their lives.

¹⁴Khoi Tan, "Bệnh thành tích trong giáo dục: Nghĩ về những tấm giấy khen được phát tràn lan," at The Gioi & Viet nam (accessed May 25, 2022), <https://baoquocte.vn>.

¹⁵ An Xuan, An Xuan, "Giáo viên hối lộ để nâng điểm ở Hòa Bình nhận 30 tháng tù," at Cafebiz (accessed May 21, 2020), <https://cafebiz.vn>.

¹⁶ Tra Khắc Truong, "Người Việt nói dối: Con số và viễn cảnh," at ChungTa (accessed March 31, 2020), <https://www.chungta.com>.

¹⁷Loc Tan Le, "Đạo đức học sinh: Thực trạng, nguyên nhân và giải pháp," at Giao duc & Xa hoi (accessed January 25, 2019), <https://giaoducvaxahoi.vn>.

Individualism also becomes a threat when the sense of sin loses its function in our lives. Pope Pius XII affirms this sentiment over seventy years ago, “Perhaps the greatest sin in the world today is that men have begun to lose the sense of sin.”¹⁸ Thus, individuals no longer recognize what the standards should be for evaluating their actions other than one’s own opinion. Such contemporary theories have intertwined truth with dishonesty and exchanged good for evil.¹⁹ In particular, young people in Vietnam are living in an environment of atheism fueled by individualism.

The theory of individualism exalts individual freedom. The opinion of individuals is considered the criterion for evaluating the moral value of life. They exalt this “freedom” and consider individual freedom an absolute. They ignore the voice of universal truth as a principle of conscience and instead place conscience underneath individual choice. People must be free in their convictions; therefore, religion is only a personal matter (VS 88). The assessment of what is right or wrong is based on individual desires.

Veritatis splendor explains how people in modern times are in a crisis of truth-seeking because individualism promotes this individual “freedom” (VS 32). As a result, the individual’s conscience is independently determining the criteria of wrong and right which determines their actions. Hence, the truth of each individual will be different. As *Veritatis splendor* states: “Each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others” (VS 32). The concept of freedom is not guided by the universal principle of truth, but by individual autonomy.

As a result of promoting individualism, many young people are willing to have an abortion because the state allows it and the pregnancy will affect their career, personal life, and

¹⁸ Pope Pius XII, Radio Message of His Holiness Pius XII to Participants in the National Catechetical Congress of the United States in Boston (October 26, 1946), <https://www.vatican.va>.

¹⁹ Jankunas, *The Dictatorship of Relativism*, 11.

appearance. There are even young people who give birth and resort to throwing the infant in the trash. For example, at 3:30 p.m. on January 16, 2021, people who lived on Le Duan Street in Hai Ba Trung District, Ha Noi City, found inside a black bag a dead fetus next to a trash can in their neighborhood.²⁰ Even more heartbreaking, the head of the Garbage Treatment Plant in Ca Mau City confirmed that they discovered more than 300 fetal corpses lying in the garbage of the Waste Treatment Plant in Ca Mau city from 2012 to 2019.²¹

THEOLOGY COMPONENT

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that conscience is within every human being to help one judge between good and bad (CCC 1778). Therefore, anyone is able to choose between good and avoid evil because of the understanding of the good in the natural operation of one's own reason. Furthermore, *Gaudium et spes* teaches that conscience is a way we hear the voice of God and functions as an act of human intelligence to judge what is right or wrong (GS 16). Concurrently, our conscience allows us to hear God's voice through the guidance of the Church. Thus, the Church has held that a properly formed conscience is the "rule of God" and the inner moral authority within each person to guide one's whole life—from thoughts to words to actions.²²

Historical Overview of Conscience for the Catholic Church

²⁰ Nhan Minh, "Vụ thai nhi bị vứt bỏ cạnh thùng rác ở Hà Nội," at KENH14 (accessed January 18, 2021), <https://kenh14.vn>.

²¹ Hung Nguyen, "Trong 7 năm phát hiện hơn 300 xác thai nhi lẫn trong rác ở Cà Mau," at Tuoitre Online (accessed April 24, 2019), <https://tuoitre.vn>.

²² Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae* (7 December 1965), §3.

In Latin, the term *conscientia* means “conscience” and is used to describe the knowledge of good and evil.²³ A properly formed conscience, as defined today, is the inner and sacred place of the human heart where a voice unites the person with truth and goodness (also called the voice of God).²⁴ Ancient philosophers did not use the term “conscience,” but they discussed their understanding of what we now call “conscience.”²⁵ Therefore, their thoughts greatly contributed to today’s Christian understanding.

In ancient Greek civilization, philosophers explained ideas about a conscience without using the term explicitly. Instead, they discussed the varying capacities of human life using the term *synderesis* or *synteresis*.²⁶ The term refers to proper judgment of moral good or evil based on general ethical principles. Therefore, *synteresis* makes a connection between a human being and God. A person has the capacity to determine if his or her actions are in harmony with God because God is inscribed *synteresis* within humanity. This idea was held by Socrates who believed there was a voice inside his heart guiding him to what was right and wrong.²⁷ St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) interpreted ancient Greek philosophers to further develop the Church’s teachings on conscience.

St. Augustine was influenced by Platonism in his view of conscience. He used the ideas of virtue, justice, and goodness to talk about the Divine Love that emerges from humans. During moments of solitude, the love of God speaks to the inner place of a person’s heart where conscience is revealed. He explained, “you have done alms first to your own soul, within your

²³ Cornelius William Williams, “Conscience,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement*, ed. Robert L. Fastigi, vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale, 2009), 158.

²⁴ *Veritatis splendor*, §58.

²⁵ Peter Eardley, “Medieval Theories of Conscience,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu>.

²⁶ Bernard Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956), 121.

²⁷ Daniel A. Dombrowski, “The Heart of the Matter: A Very Brief History of Conscience,” *Conscience*, August 22, 2016, www.consciencemag.org.

conscience.”²⁸ He believed that one could hide something from another person, but not from God. Augustine confessed, “Lord, before whose eyes the abyss of man’s conscience lies naked, what things within me could be hidden from you, even if I would not confess it to you.”²⁹ Therefore, a properly formed conscience allows for communication with God, which is the only thing that “[distinguishes] human beings and makes them closer to the divine than other beings.”³⁰

Similar to St. Augustine’s influence by an ancient Greek philosopher, St. Thomas was inspired by Aristotelian thought to develop his understanding of human conscience. He believed that the first precept of law is “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.”³¹ According to Aquinas, there are particular scenarios where one should use reason to make the right decision. He explains, “When concupiscence waxes strong, reason declares by a universal judgment that a particular desirable thing is to be avoided.”³² St. Thomas’ understanding of conscience is based on the nature of intellect in which reason plays a leading role in knowing what is morally right and wrong.³³ Ancient Greek philosophers guided St. Augustine and St. Thomas in defining conscience within a Catholic context.

Karol Wojtyła was influenced by the thoughts of Aristotle and Thomas. He also supported this idea that humans have the intellectual capacity to take responsibility for their own actions. Wojtyła states that conscience plays a significant role in the “fulfillment” of one’s actions as well as one’s inner self. He asserts, “the person’s authentic transcendence in action is

²⁸ Augustine, “Sermon 56 on the New Testament,” www.newadvent.org.

²⁹ Augustine, *The Confession*, X, 2, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), 229.

³⁰ Dombrowski, “Heart of the Matter.”

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, II, q. 94, a. 2, in *Summa theologiae: Complete English Edition in Three Volumes*, vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (NY: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), 1009.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics,”* Book VII, Lecture III, 1348, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Notre Dame, IN: Dum Ox Books, 1993), 424.

³³ *ST*, I, q. 79, a. 13, 408.

realized in conscience, and the *actus humanus* takes shape as the willing and choosing of a ‘true good’ thanks to conscience.”³⁴ The role of conscience is not only about one’s action, but also about the personal self. One becomes a good and authentic human being by coordinating good actions with a true conscience.³⁵

In addition to these ideas presented by ancient Greek philosophers, reference to conscience is also found in the Bible. The term “heart” can be used to describe conscience in the Old Testament. Although the exact term is not written, the Old Testament describes the notion of a conscience, which is often presented as a bad heart or a heart disturbed after sin.³⁶ For example, when David speaks to Nathan that he had sinned against the Lord in the Second Book of Samuel. So, the word “conscience” can be understood as a man standing before God to answer for his actions in the light of justice, goodness, and the wrong of evil. This is also demonstrated in the case of Adam and Eve after they disobeyed God (cf. Gen 3:6-24), as well as the voice of reproach from Cain’s heart after killing his younger brother (cf. Gen 4:8-16). Conscience in the Old Testament is understood as the inscription of God’s law in the heart of every human being to help guide one’s actions.

This concept is also present in the New Testament. Again, the Gospels do not specifically use the term; however, conscience is understood as the spirit or heart when referring to a feeling after a poor decision is made³⁷ (cf. Lk 15:21; 22:62; Mt 9:4). The Word of God is sown into the heart and bears fruit (Mt 13:23). St. Paul describes conscience as the law that God has written in the heart of man. He further explains that it is a witness of God (Rom 2:15; 2 Cor 1:12) because

³⁴ Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 234.

³⁵ Wojtyła, “Subject and Community,” 235.

³⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, “Bible Dictionaries: Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Heart,” 1997, <https://www.biblestudytools.com>.

³⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, “Bible Dictionaries.”

it goes hand in hand with human actions and serves as a testimony to truth. A properly formed conscience allows one to realize that all decisions are held accountable before God.

Freedom of Conscience and the Magisterium of the Church

Veritatis splendor recognizes that human conscience is influenced by physical, psychological, emotional, social, and cultural factors leading to erroneous judgments in some cases (VS 62). Therefore, the Church's Magisterium offers ways to guide us in the search for truth and goodness. "The magisterial teaching of the Church should serve as the norm to which the conscience should conform."³⁸ This means that human conscience must listen to the Church, especially teachings on moral matters since they have contributed greatly to the proper formation of Christian conscience. For example, *Dignitatis humanae* teaches that conscience should be guided by the Church's Magisterium:

In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origins in human nature itself (DH 14).

Individual conscience must avoid being in opposition to the moral law or to the Magisterium of the Church. If people believe in the mission of the Church, their conscience requires them to follow Church's teaching which leads us to Christ (VS 12). Conscience matures by living according to the Word of God, with the help of the Church's teaching. In addition, conscience needs to be strengthened by experience, in the exercise of the virtues, in the light of faith, and in the impetus of hope and love. Conscience is exercised in discernment by the Word

³⁸ Williams, "Conscience," 165.

of God that is inscribed in our minds and frees us from loneliness by integrating us into the communion of the Church.

In searching for the truth, the human person is always accompanied and assisted by the Church. The Church's teaching on morality is enough to firmly direct a person to the truth and eventually to one's salvation. *Veritatis splendor* further shows the Church's effort to properly guide human conscience in this way:

The authority of the Church, when she pronounces on moral questions, in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. This is so not only because freedom of conscience is never freedom "from" the truth but always and only freedom "in" the truth ... The Church puts herself always and only at the *service of conscience*, helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit, and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man (VS 64).

This once again affirms that the Church has a responsibility to help and direct the human conscience.

The Relationship between Freedom, Law, and Conscience in the Teachings of the Church

Secular movements exalt freedom as an absolute (VS 88) and give people the right to decide right from wrong on an individual basis. A relative human morality guided by reason is created with its own rules.³⁹ In addition, freedom is viewed as the primary criterion of moral judgment. "Whatever favors freedom is morally good; whatever diminishes or opposes it is evil."⁴⁰ Therefore, "certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values. The individual *conscience* is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which

³⁹ Servais Th. Pinckaers, "An Encyclical for the Future: *Veritatis splendor*," in *The Splendor of the Truth: "Veritatis splendor" and the Renewal of Moral Theology; Studies by Ten Outstanding Scholars*, ed. J.A. Dinoia and Romanus Cessario (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), 41.

⁴⁰ Pinckaers, "Encyclical for the Future," 41.

hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil” (VS 32). This complete autonomy leads to the rejection of laws imposed even from divine authority.

Church teachings utilize both Scripture and Tradition to show the true nature of freedom and its relationship to law and conscience. “Genuine freedom is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image in man. For God willed to leave man in the power of his own counsel, so that he would seek his Creator of his own accord and would freely arrive at full and blessed perfection by cleaving to God” (VS 34). Human beings are empowered to take control of their actions with the freedom of choice which is patterned on the freedom of God.⁴¹ Moreover, human freedom allows participation in God’s dominion and providence. However, human beings are mortal and as a result, their freedom and abilities are limited.

Furthermore, everyone is wounded by original sin. As a result, humanity needs God’s Revelation to fully perceive truth and morality. Freedom is given through God’s Law which is inscribed in the heart of every person, “the natural law is written and engraved in the heart of each and every person, since it is none other than human reason itself which commands us to do good and counsels us not to sin” (VS 44). This law allows us to cooperate with God in regulating one’s own behavior and life. Therefore, we only enjoy true moral autonomy because we share in God’s supreme autonomy.

Only this internal authority in human beings has the right to demand and motivate people to observe the moral truth of objectivity, which is conscience. The Church believes that conscience is the voice of God and that it receives “the primordial insight of goodness and evil.”⁴² It is like a spiritual light that shines in the heart of each person and urges everyone to do

⁴¹ Pinckaers, “Encyclical for the Future,” 42.

⁴² Pinckaers, “Encyclical for the Future,” 43.

good. However, conscience is not an infallible judge, so it can be erroneous (VS 62). It always preserves the original light that impels one to seek the truth ceaselessly and to progress continuously in goodness. Conscience is the witness and agent of the inner light which is expressed in natural law. “The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good, whose attractiveness the human person perceives and whose commandments he accepts” (VS 60).

Human conscience needs to be enlightened and guided by the Word of God as well (VS 28). Through the Bible, one realizes the need for God’s commandments along with the realization that the Creator’s natural law is also the work of conscience (cf. Rom 2:14-16). Through conscience, one can overcome and reconcile his or her individual freedom with the objective truth of God’s law. Human freedom, conscience, and God’s law “meet and are called to intersect” (VS 41). The basis for the Church’s teaching on morality is that freedom needs the light of conscience to discover true goodness and to grow in truth.⁴³

Conclusion

The Church invites everyone, especially Christians, to faithfully embrace the entire legacy of the Church’s moral teaching for it is “the path of the moral life that the way of salvation is open to all” (VS 3). The Church proclaims moral principles in every time and place, including related matters of social life, because of the desire to protect human dignity and the salvation of souls (VS 27). In addition, it is the Church’s duty to present moral truths to help

⁴³ Pinckaers, “Encyclical for the Future,” 44.

everyone walk on the path of true freedom. Thus, the Church holds that conscience attains true freedom by following the way of Christ who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (VS 2).

PROJECT COMPONENT

The Church has always sought ways to awaken people’s conscience to God’s voice. Thus, my plan is to follow past practices of the faith tradition as well as developing new resources that specially address the situation of the younger generation in Vietnam. To accomplish this, I intend to work with the presbyterate to cultivate a culture of reconciliation to help young people restore a sensitivity of guilt within one’s conscience. I also intend to work with the parents within my diocese to cultivate a culture of love where the younger generation can first flourish before tackling social and cultural challenges. By engaging both the priests and parents of my diocese, I intend to advocate for a comprehensive approach that involves both the physical and spiritual family.

Building a Culture of Reconciliation in the Hearts of Young People

If people are weak and prone to sin, then the parish community along with the clergy must guide young people to the streams of grace found in the Sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Penance. Through this Sacrament of Reconciliation, we are able to closely examine our conscience to acknowledge our shortcomings and mistakes. This is a formative opportunity where the Church can guide the young people if they are encouraged to go to confession whenever there are serious doubts regarding one’s action. Therefore, this sacrament is an important place for young people to encounter Christ and learn more about themselves in the process. Of course, parents and priests must lead by example and go to Confession themselves!

Since conscience is the judgment of reason, it requires knowledge of the foundations and criteria of moral action. To address this, young people must learn about the Church's moral teachings through courses, retreats, and seminars. Therefore, priests in parishes must regularly have these opportunities on ethics and Catholic-based psychology for young people.

Reconciliatio et paenitentia says, "The sense of sin can only be restored through a clear reminder of the unchangeable principles of reason and faith which the moral teaching of the church has always upheld"⁴⁴. In addition, this Church document reminds us that "this will be aided by sound catechetics, illuminated by the biblical theology of the covenant, by an attentive listening and trustful openness to the magisterium of the Church, which; never ceases to enlighten consciences, and by an ever more careful practice of the Sacrament of Penance" (RP 18).

The promotion of the Sacrament of Penance should be done while building a culture of reconciliation throughout the parish community and in individual homes. I intend to help with this initiative by conducting seminars at the diocesan level. The participants of these seminars will be parish priests of my diocese. In these seminars, we will examine false theories that are ravaging the conscience of young people today. By first examining where the problem stems from, I hope to develop new materials as well as adapting current ones to specifically address the Vietnamese context.

At their parishes, pastors will be able to start formation programs and other events with resources from the Diocesan Pastoral Center. In addition, formation events focusing on charity encourages a greater sense of compassion and accompaniment. Thus, priests and parents work together not only to educate and form the conscience of young people, but also to intervene before they make poor decisions when red flags appear. Through a true spirit of reconciliation,

⁴⁴ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (2 December 1984), §18, <https://www.vatican.va>.

the younger generation is invited into a closer examination of the thoughts and actions forming their conscience. In addition to working with the pastors at diocesan gatherings, I also plan to visit local parish communities to help initiate strategies that cultivate a spirit of reconciliation within the Vietnamese context.

Building a Culture of Love in the Hearts of Young People

One of the most effective ways to form proper consciences is to build love in people's hearts. Young people can only have love in their lives when they are surrounded in a loving environment. Since schools in Vietnam do not form the moral life of young people, the Church must take on this responsibility. The advantage in Vietnam is that most Catholic families are attached to the Church through the Mass and other pastoral activities in their parishes. Therefore, individual families along with their parishes must create a culture of love for the young people.

Therefore, I must work with the parish priest in reaching out to families to encourage parents that raising children is not merely a duty or responsibility, but a journey of love. Parents must try to build the family with love because the family is willed by God for their children and for their own benefit. In this atmosphere, children are taught first and foremost by their parents to love God and others. However, it will be my responsibility along with their pastor to help parents to accomplish this. Through such a partnership between the priests and parents, we will try to help their children do charitable works at least once a week by encouraging them to love the poor, the sick, and the suffering. These important encounters provide formative lessons in responding to the world since parents must make the family the first school to train not only good citizens in society, but ultimately for the heavenly one.

The parish serves as a larger family where young people go out from their initial home to create new relationships and share their thoughts and deeds within a new familial environment. A parish is a place where young people share their love with each other. So, the parish should always have charitable activities for young people to do together. For example, priests and young people might visit and give gifts to the sick and poor at the beginning of each month while the parish may regularly organize sporting events to help young people have close relationships with each other. In particular, the priest should choose a saint to be the patron saint of the young people in the parish. Priests help young people live in the ways of their patron saints through homilies at Mass, during Eucharistic Adoration, and in other prayers. In addition, the parish should also have youth Masses every Sunday where young people sing and read the readings and are Eucharistic ministers at their Mass. In short, the pastoral works in the parish must help young people to feel the amazing attraction and power of love in their lives and then motivate them to build a culture of reconciliation and love together in their families, parishes, and places where they are present.

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