



THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE  
**Office of Human Life,  
Family and Bioethics**



## *A Bit of Bioethics*

### **CONSCIENCE FORMATION & OBJECTIVE TRUTH**

June 2020

Dear Friends for Life,

It is with rejoicing that we finally experience the step-wise re-opening of New York and a gradual return to parish life with attendance at Mass, confession and reception of the Eucharist! At the same time, there is deep mourning for the loss of family members, friends and acquaintances whose parting from us was made all the more difficult by the restrictions under which we have all been living since March.

This has been a time of suffering for everyone, whether directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic. As if this were not bad enough, however, in the last few weeks our already-grieving nation has been catapulted from a state of mandated dormancy to the extreme opposite of widespread civil unrest associated with an equal degree of distress and lamentation—over which there is no dearth of opinions. As these events unfold before us, a prudent forbearance must find consolation in the words of St. Peter: “But if you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.” (1 Peter 2:20-21)

So too, St. Paul tells us, “...where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more.” (Romans 5:20) What better time to reflect on how we can be vessels of overflowing grace? One essential way is to better understand conscience and objective truth.

#### **CONSCIENCE**

**Conscience** is a rational judgment that determines an act to be right or wrong. It is the “voice of God” that speaks to every person to seek good and reject evil. It is so important that we are obligated to follow a certain conscience even if it is in error (that is, an error of which we are not aware); if there is doubt or uncertainty, we must study the issue further before deciding how to proceed. Even after the act is performed, conscience continues to work and lets us rest in a clear conscience or wrestle with a guilty conscience. Ultimately, conscience is a gift from God used to exercise our free will. This underscores the importance of properly forming our consciences through study and practice.

From the USCCB's "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," **conscience formation:**

- is a **lifelong** responsibility.
- is based on the **Word of God**.
- embraces the **authoritative teaching of the Church** on *objective moral truth*.
- requires humble **prayer** and rigorous **examination of conscience**.
- emulates the **holy witness** of others and seeks a trusted source for guidance when needed.
- Practices the **virtues**, in particular the virtue of prudence.
- Is **reinforced** by obeying a certain conscience and **undermined** by disobeying a certain conscience (or acting on a doubtful conscience).

A well-formed conscience leads to good judgments, right actions and a grace-filled life! On the other hand, ignoring the serious duty to form our consciences properly can lead to erroneous judgments for which we are responsible and incur sin. If we are not responsible for the erroneous judgment (e.g. an error through unintended ignorance), the subsequent act performed remains evil, but we are not morally culpable in the same way. However, we must always remember God is all merciful and we should seek forgiveness and conversion when we are guilty of sin.

Conscience is the application of reason which derives from **natural law**, that is, what Charles Rice calls the "manufacturer's directions" on how we ought to act. This natural law is a knowable standard if we are inclined to seek the ultimate good which is eternal communion with God the Creator; it is "written in their hearts" (Romans 2:15). But its obligations are also clearly delineated in the Ten Commandments and authoritatively interpreted by the universal Catholic Church as governed by the Holy Spirit. Natural law reveals **objective moral truth** (that is, the reality of something being good or bad, that transcends individuals' perspectives).

### **OBJECTIVE TRUTH**

Now, just because you, I or anyone else sees something one way does not make that objectively true. In fact, objective truth is not based upon emotions, perspectives, or desires which are subjective and differ from one individual to the next. Rather, objective truth is absolute and unchanging in its essence. You can rely on it to remain the same for you, me and everyone else for all time because it is universally true. What is good is good, and what is evil is evil. Therefore, ***objective truth is foundational to a well-formed conscience.***

Unfortunately, we as a society have fallen into the trap of "moral relativism" in which subjective truth (based on an individual's personal views) has become the norm on which many decide whether something is good or evil, something we ought or ought not to do. That is, what we think becomes an imposter truth. Instead, though, it should be the other way around: that absolute truth informs what we personally think.

Subjective truth fails us because if you see something one way and I see it another way, who can know what is good and what is evil? If you interpret a red light to mean "stop" and I "agree to disagree," I am "free" to run the red light, but eventually there is going to be a bad collision. I will get hurt and likely someone else will, too. Being in the hospital, maybe paralyzed, or dead, won't feel so "free" anymore. That's exactly what happens when different "value" systems (i.e. different individual's

subjective truths) encounter each other on certain moral matters. It is true that we have the free will to choose “what we want” (that is, we may choose evil over good). But whether or not we choose what we ought to do, we must not forget that all actions have consequences.

Remember, truth is ordered to God so it is always good. That which is not truth leads us away from God. “...the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

### **WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?**

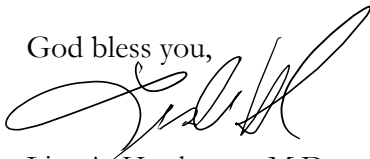
In the last few months, we have witnessed acts of extreme selflessness, extreme evil and so much in between. We see what happens when reason and objective truth are upheld and when they are eclipsed by subjective truth and malformed consciences.

Our Office is proud to uphold and promote the objective moral truth **that every human life, created in the Image and Likeness of God, is sacred with an inviolable dignity.** This truth is immutable. It is true for each and every innocent human life for all time. The incomparable dignity and inestimable value of every human life is the justification for obedience to the stay-at-home orders intended to protect the health and well-being of the vulnerable. It is the motivation for every first responder, officer of the law, health care worker, etc. to do his or her job with diligence. It is as much the principle behind the just condemnation of a murderous act by a depraved police officer as it is by a malicious looter. It is the reason callous decisions that put vulnerable people at risk are criticized and why behaviors that willfully threaten the safety or deny the full humanity of others are indefensible. It is the basis for how we move forward in our lives and work to give glory to God.

It is clear that where a well-formed conscience is applied, society cooperates and thrives for the good of the community because everyone’s goals are similarly aligned. Where conscience hinges on a subjective paradigm of truth, suffering (often grave suffering) ensues because the individual’s goal is paramount; but, as one among many, inevitably these will conflict. **Without moral order there can be no social order.** We have seen this firsthand and, in response, we are called to pursue earnestly our duty to continuously form our consciences properly and to advance objective moral truth in the world.

Now is the time.

God bless you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa A. Honkanen', written in a cursive style.

Lisa A. Honkanen, M.D.