

# *Moral Decision Making*

*by Reverend Frank McNulty*

Sometimes we can gain moral insight from a television program. Recently I watched a program in which a pastor is consulted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation by a young woman who finds herself pregnant and considering an abortion. The priest tells her to “follow your conscience,” and little more. Later, she consults another priest who explains the Church’s position on abortion, but offers no further advice.

Both priests’ approaches are extreme. The first might be called “interiorizing.” The latter could be called “exteriorizing.” The first priest threw the ball completely into the young woman’s court; the second priest carried the ball for her. One priest forgot that her complete value system had a role to play; the other forgot that an essential part of that value system is a freedom of conscience. But what does that freedom entail?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human

person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act.” (CCC, 1778) It can be something like a Geiger counter making appropriate noises when you approach a sinful choice. But if you only interiorize and make an isolated decision, you may ignore history, the gospel, or the Church. You may ignore the rights of others.

The opposite extreme has its own set of dangers. You might ignore your conscience and turn the choice over solely to someone else—a confessor, a pastor, a theologian, or a church teaching. However, we must not evade our personal responsibility by leaving it entirely to others to make our moral judgments.

The determination of what is right and what is wrong is accomplished by a person, and there is much more to a person than intellect or this particular moment of existence. We all see life through our own filters. These filters come from our emotions, attitudes, prejudices, and personal histories. They come from

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