

Statement on the Formation of Conscience Canadian Catholic Conference, 1 December, 1973

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Copied in its entirety from [The Protection of Conscience Project](#). (grammatical errors corrected)

PROLOGUE

1. In all creation man alone of the visible world is called by God to accept the responsibility of his actions. Yet God did not desert him in a world of mystery where good and evil are often interwoven and frequently filled with complexities. We who are Christians believe that not only did God give us his guidance "engraved on their hearts" (Rom: 2:15) showing us in the very depth of our being the things which are for our good, he also intervened in history to reveal himself in his Son, our Lord Jesus. Henceforth, Jesus and the Spirit he was to send from the Father would be the focal point of our life and of our doing, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6).

2. Man, then, has God's clear teaching to guide him, found in Scripture and tradition, protected and authenticated by the teaching Church. God speaks to us also through concrete situations, the providential framework of our existence, our times, our vicissitudes, events, happenings, circumstances. "The People of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord, who fills the earth" (Gaudium et Spes, #11).

3. Above all, we believe that we live now in the time of the fullness of Christ, the law of love. The responsibility of the Christian is not only to fight against his sinful nature in which he is assisted by his obedience to all legitimate laws. It is also to respond to God's call to conversion in a movement towards Christ and his Spirit. It is the realization of what it means to be Christian, a son of God. "Christian, acknowledge your dignity. Become what you are, another Christ" (St. Leo the Great, First Christmas Sermon).

4. It is in this context that we wish to present these considerations on conscience. We must of necessity at times leave this high ground because man is frail and loses himself readily. But we do so always with the serenity and joy of those who know that we have already triumphed in our Risen Lord.

PART ONE

I. THE MEANING OF CONSCIENCE

The Basic Concept

5. The signs of our times have much to say to us even when they point to negative and harmful dimensions. The most optimistic person could hardly deny that our times are characterized by a frightening confusion in regard to man's moral life and the understanding of values which for many centuries were taken for granted. It is to this confusion of mind that we would like to address ourselves at the present moment in order to provide certain pastoral guidelines which are meant primarily for our Catholic people, but to which we are meant primarily for our Catholic people, we invite the attention of all people of good will interested in preserving the best elements of our

civilization and culture. We appeal in a special manner to those who share with us our faith in Christ as Redeemer and as guide of our lives.

6. To be consistent, since we openly admit the existence of confusion, we cannot even take the idea of "conscience" for granted. It has always been a somewhat ambiguous term and has frequently been presented with more poetry than clarity. Conscience is not simply some "still small voice" which is evoked by some mysterious mechanism within us when we are faced with a practical decision as to whether a given course of action is acceptable or not. Conscience is that ultimate judgement that every man is called to make as to whether this or that action is acceptable to him without violating the principles which he is prepared to admit as governing his life. If he goes against those principles, he is said to be acting "against his conscience."

Different Connotations

7. It follows that conscience has different connotations for different persons. We will develop this concept further in the following section on the "Formation of Conscience". For the moment it suffices to point out that for some people, the very existence of conscience will be denied. These are the men and women who refuse to accept that man is subject to any laws outside himself; in a word, they maintain that he is his own Lord and Master. In a strict logical sense these people are consistent even though it is hard to digest their premises that man is supreme in a universe which he has not made.

8. For anyone to accept the idea of conscience, as we here present it, he must begin by agreeing that man is not Lord of the Universe and that man is subject to a law-giver who is greater than he is. In a word, we must begin with that very first basis of any moral life and of any question of responsibility in our actions, the acceptance of God. And not a God who is remote and unconcerned but a God who is our Father, who made the Universe, who made each one of us and who has lovingly cast our lives in a certain framework (Gen. 1:26-27).

9. In that same love, he has made us not automata who are led by the blind forces of the universe, but free intelligent beings and his adoptive sons to whom the challenge has come to adapt our conduct to our dignity. Man, as a consequence, must search out what is that dignity and what are the results of it in terms of how we must accept the responsibility that stems from it.

II. THE FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

10. This never-ending search which every man must undertake for himself in order to find out what is worthy of a man and what is not worthy of a man is what we call the "formation" of his conscience. And this too will be qualified by the various assumptions which he makes at any period in his life. For example, the formation of conscience in a person who simply believes in God will be different from the formation of conscience in a man who accepts that God did intervene in history and did send us a Saviour in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ who as our Brother was to rehabilitate mankind, give it a new life and lay down for us certain revealed principles, showing the way in which God expects us to act (Jn. 3:16; 8:12).

11. Further, a Christian who is also an adherent of the Catholic faith and a member of the Catholic Church must probe deeper in the refinement of what God has revealed as our norm of conduct. As Catholics we accept that Jesus committed to his disciples his own power, saying, "As the Father has sent Me, now also I send you . . ." (Jn. 20:21), "Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven" (Mt. 18:18). We

believe that this power transmitted to his disciples was meant to endure in the Church and now resides in the College of Bishops under the presiding direction of the successor of Peter. This is what we call "the magisterium" or teaching service of the Church and in matters of guiding our conduct, a binding rule for those who call themselves Catholic. (See also Mt. 28:18-20 and Jn. 14:25-26)

12. Nor must this be considered as some sort of inhibition or limiting force. It would be wrong to think that the persons most free are those who do not believe at all and that we go in a descending scale of freedom till we meet the Catholic. We believe that the reverse is true. We believe that knowing what God has established for the fulfilment of man is a freeing principle, not a principle of enslavement. The more we know about God's will for us, the more fulfilled we are, the surer we are that we will not destroy ourselves and wander into paths which will not enhance our liberty but take it away entirely. "The truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:32; Ps. 1).

13. This is the basic context in which we would like to talk about some of the problems of our times.

PART TWO

PROBLEMS OF OUR TIMES

Confusion in the Church

14. Although we admit that it would be fallacious to postulate that the changes within the Church during the past quarter century have been unrelated to the even greater upheavals in the world, for clarity's sake, we distinguish between the two areas.

15. The faithful Catholic has been disturbed and sometimes confused during the past years by a multiplicity of changes which have been unparalleled in modern history. These changes have often had implications which relate to his day-by-day actions and conduct and consequently, at least to him, appear to affect the very norms of that conduct. A few years ago, the Catholic was distinguished by external practices such as abstinence on Fridays, fasting and various penitential disciplines, a number of holy days of obligation, etc. The liturgy was an unchanging structure which had remained the same for hundreds of years. Devotions of various sorts seemed also to be immovable and irreplaceable and a necessary part of the practice of the faithful. The priest appeared as the conscience of the community and interpreted the teaching of the Church with a voice that was considered authoritative and usually unchallengeable.

16. Today much of this has changed. Many of the penitential disciplines such as fasting and abstinence are left to the judgement of the individual, the emphasis on the liturgy is one of participation and commitment, and a biblical renewal has pushed a certain number of traditional devotions into the background. As far as the priest is concerned, his role is not less important but it is less overwhelming. He still has the duty of teaching his community the way of God and of morality, but he understands better that this judgement must ultimately be made by the person himself, as we will try to describe later.

Confusion in the World

17. It is rare that changes take place in the world without influencing the Church or that changes take place in the Church without influencing the world. During this period of confusion, popular morality has been shaken to the ground roots. There is a general attitude that "I can do pretty much anything which doesn't hurt somebody else." Permissiveness sweeps our society. Practices which would previously have been repudiated as absolutely unacceptable are becoming the general rule of

conduct. We have only to look at the practice of abortion, at a growing pressure for euthanasia and the other manifestations against life itself to see the truth of the statement. In the midst of this, legislators are making the distinction between that which is legal and that which may or may not be evil in the mind of an individual. Even Catholic legislators frequently take the attitude that the law should not be guided by principles that derive from religious conviction. Many Christians are influenced by this and fall into the trap of thinking that if a thing is legal, it must be morally acceptable.

18. Another factor is the widespread propaganda which makes all aspects of family planning and sexual permissiveness a matter of private concern and individualistic ethics (*Gaudium et Spes*, #30). The idea has been abroad that "everybody is doing it" and that if everybody is doing it, it must be acceptable. Finally, the economic and political conditions of our society are tending to bring down our moral sense. The calm acceptance by some of economic inequality by which some have so much and so many have so little is combined with the depersonalizing of society and the exploitation of man. All of these and other factors have tended to bring about a reversal of traditional morality or, at the least, a great questioning of moral values.

Reaction to Confusion: Types of Conscience

19. From these factors has stemmed the confusion of conscience to which we alluded in the first lines of this Statement. Although it may represent some species of oversimplification, we feel that something can be gained by placing the types of reaction to the general situation in three categories. These are not totally exclusive categories but they do sum up, pretty well, the general possible attitudes of the Catholic today.

20. a. In the first category are those who have developed a static or complacent conscience. These persons have not accepted the dynamics behind the changes in the Church and in society, and have not seen the positive value which can come from personal acceptance of moral responsibility. They insist that the Church must spell out for them every obligation down to the last detail. This attitude of conscience is of course a denial of responsibility and can result in negating the whole positive value of the movement of the Spirit at the present time.

21. b. At the opposite extreme we have the excessively dynamic and revolutionary conscience. This characterizes the person who has totally misread the idea that everyone must ultimately be the judge, before God, of his actions, and that in the ultimate decision he must make up his own mind. The persons in this category have distorted an appeal to intelligent decision into a destruction of law, objective structures, and have arrived at the conclusion that no one can tell them what to do, including the Church. It is seldom stated this way, but it is where this type of exaggerated subjectivism necessarily leads.

22. c. In the middle position is the conscience which we consider to be the proper attitude of any human being in today's society, and particularly of the Catholic Christian. We can qualify this as the dynamic Christian conscience. This is the conscience which leads us to have a responsible attitude to someone, to Jesus, to the community, to the Church, etc. Every person who fits into this category feels a responsibility for a progressive search and strives to live out a life ideal according to the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5).

PART THREE

FUNDAMENTAL BASIS FOR MATURE CONSCIENCE

23. In support of this type of conscience, we offer the following considerations.

Human Dignity

24. In the first place, this category represents a truly acceptable and dignified human position. Vatican Council II has clearly placed great emphasis upon the basic dignity and value of the human being and upon his responsibility as the ultimate judge under God of the value of his action. "For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man may be left 'in the hand of his own counsel' (Ecclesiasticus 15:14) so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a choice is personally motivated and prompted from within. It does not result from blind internal impulse nor from more external pressure" (Gaudium et Spes, #17). Consequently, it is the proper dignity of every human being to feel the responsibility which is postulated by God himself in the manner in which He has created us. This is the basis for the argument which St. Paul presented in his letter to the Romans, where he so clearly enunciates the fact that every human being, in coming into the world, has God's law in his heart. By this he means two things. First, that man is responsible for his acts, and secondly, that he cannot take it upon himself to act according to the whims of the moment without reference to his Creator, to his fellow men and to himself (Rom 2:14-16).

Responsibility

25. In our times we welcome the growing maturity of our people who understand this first element, but we remind them that so to judge does not dispense them from the second element of referring to God's presence, variously but truly manifested in their lives and guiding their judgements.

26. "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged" (Gaudium et Spes, #16).

Antidote to Denial of Sin

27. We feel that this type of mature conscience will be the greatest antidote to the growing attack, both explicit and implicit, upon the concept of man's sinfulness. The exaggerated and pseudo-autonomy of man has led us into a frame of mind in which we have played down the concept of sin and redemption, and have deliberately turned our backs upon the clear teaching of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ that while God is a loving Father, he cannot be mocked. This does not postulate the ancient erroneous idea that God is some sort of a tyrant who is looking for an opportunity to punish us. On the other hand, the very gift of our freedom indicates that when we misuse it, we ourselves will suffer. In this sense, possible punishment is the necessary concomitant of the law of love. Love cannot be forced upon anyone, but as a modern writer has put it, "He who rejects love is in turn rejected by it and lies howling at the threshold."

The "howling at the threshold" could hardly be blamed upon the person who has offered love and has been rejected. The suffering of those who reject God's norms of life is of their own doing. Hence, we feel that a dynamic Christian conscience is one which recognizes all of these facts and is freed by it. It is therefore freed from the necessity of pretending that sin is not there and that the eventual result of sin is not there.

Faith Dimension

28. We have already pointed out that the basic responsibility of every human being lies in the fact that he is God's creature and that, as a result, he must assume responsibility for his actions over which God has given him direct stewardship. But, we have also pointed out that for the Christian and for the Catholic Christian, in particular, there are guides which he has freely accepted which are meant to help him to discover that light of God's guidance within him.

29. In this context, we necessarily insist first and foremost upon the working of the Spirit in the hearts of men (Jn. 15:26; 16:7-13). Vatican II brought us from a somewhat widespread opinion that the Catholic Church constituted a monolithic arrangement in which the very voice of the Spirit was controlled and channelled. Everything was supposed to come from above, with the faithful, as it were, the ultimate recipients of the straining of the Spirit through the upper echelons. It is obvious that nothing so crass was ever officially taught by the Church, but impressions are sometimes more lasting and more universal than teachings. The insistence of the Council on the importance of the people of God and of their personal and direct relationship to the Spirit is a clarification which must never be lost to sight (Lumen Gentium, #4 and #12).

30. It is under this heading that we recognize the need of the personal conversion and acceptance of salvation by every human being. The Council (Lumen Gentium #13 and #48) has explicitly upheld the scriptural teaching that God wills the salvation of all men, but there is always the second movement to this symphony of love and that is that man cannot be saved without himself. Every man must turn freely to God. For us who believe in an order over and above that of the temporal and temporary, this turning to God and the acceptance of his loving will for man, even though he has revealed himself in an obscure fashion, is called an act of faith. It is the free decision of a man to accept as true that God has spoke to us ". . . in former times . . . in fragmentary and varied fashions through the prophets. But in this the final age He has spoken to us in the Son . . ." (Hb. 1:1-2). The guidance of the Church is a part of that revelation.

PART FOUR

GUIDES FOR CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

31. We are now in a position where we can lay down certain norms for the guidance of the conscience of the Catholic Christian. If our positions up to this point have been accepted, it follows that an act of conscience is an individual thing but must be based upon certain accepted principles and positions. It becomes, therefore, the duty of the individual to acquire the necessary information and attitude in order to make the right decision.

Human Balance

32. Certain human conditions undoubtedly aid in the balanced performance which one requires from a Christian. Sound emotional stability, a cultivation of self-knowledge and clear objective judgement, even education itself, will undoubtedly help, although we must not postulate a certain elitism which would expect only the educated to have sound conscience. The assistance of sound communal attitudes and of cultural and social influences - all of these things are sound human contributions to the acquisition of knowledge and, above all, of proper attitude.

33. But these fall far short of the total necessary conditions for the formation of conscience and their ultimate application in life.

Presence of Christ

34. For the man who had made his act of faith, the prime factor in the formation of his conscience and in his moral judgement is to be found in the existence and the role of Christ in his life (Jn. 14:6-8); 12:46). A person who wishes to have a true Christian conscience must be faithfully in communication with his Lord in all of his life, particularly through his own prayer and the prayer of the Church. Indeed, properly understood, the presence of Christ in his life is all-pervasive and all-embracing. All the other aspects of conscience formation are based on this one and stem from it. This does not make them unnecessary or superfluous, but simply puts them in their place (1 Jn. 4:1).

Scripture and Tradition

35. With this in mind, the man of faith draws his inspiration from the Scripture, the very Word of God in which he finds revealed not only the designs of the Father in the historical context of the world, but a refined series of ideals, precepts and examples given to us by the same Lord Jesus. This is communicated to him not only in the words of the Scripture but in the Spirit of Jesus which continues to live with us and which makes us "a chosen race and a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation and a people set apart" (1 Pet. 2:9).

The Magisterium

36. It is in this context that the teaching of the Church finds its full force. We have seen through sad historical example, the kind of confusion that can arise from an unguided and overly subjective reading of the Scriptures and interpretation of tradition. The Church has been given to us to make sure that the Word of God contained in the Scripture and illustrated to us in the Spirit can be authenticated in the community of believers.

37. In this one Spirit of which we speak, we have the service of the apostles and of their successors, the College of Bishops, united with their head, the Pope. The role of the apostles and their successors was and is to bear witness to Christ, the revealer of the Father's Will. It was and is their duty to transmit the testimony of the original apostles concerning Christ, to celebrate the new covenant and to guide the people of God in the living of the new creation of Christ (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-16). Guided by the Spirit, the Church has sought to do precisely this in the past and continues to do so in the present world while turned toward the second coming of Christ. The doctrinal service of the successors of the apostles includes the Scriptures and tradition as described above. In the fulfilment of this task, they do not seek to suppress the other gifts of the Spirit but encourage all to test the gifts according to the criteria found in Scripture and tradition.

38. For a believer, this teaching of the magisterium as outlined above cannot be just one element among others in the formation of his conscience. It is the definitive cornerstone upon which the whole edifice of conscientious judgement must be built. "You are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus himself is the foundation stone" (Eph. 2:20). "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church" (Mt. 16:18). What must be kept in mind is that we are in the dimension of faith. And we should be encouraged and hopeful because we can count on the continued assistance of the Holy Spirit in a manner which pure reason could never give.

39. The responsible person, as defined above, must weigh the facts before acting. This is far removed from saying that he may act in accordance with his whims and wishes. A believer has the absolute obligation of conforming his conduct first and foremost to what the Church teaches, because first and foremost for the believer is that Christ, through his Spirit, is ever present in his Church, in the whole Church to be sure, but particularly with those who exercise services within the Church and for the Church, the first of which services is that of the apostles.

40. Furthermore, even in matters which have not been defined *ex cathedra*, i.e., infallibly, the believer has the obligation to give full priority to the teaching of the Church in favour of a given position, to pray for the light of the Spirit, to refer to Scripture and tradition and to maintain a dialogue with the whole Church, which he can do only through the source of unity which is the collectivity of the bishops. The reality itself, for example, sex, marriage, economics, politics, war, must be studied in detail. In this study, he should make an effort to become aware of his own inevitable presuppositions as well as his cultural background which leads him to act for or react against any given position. If his ultimate practical judgement to do this or avoid that does not take into full account the teaching of the Church, an account based not only on reason but on the faith dimension, he is deceiving himself in pretending that he is acting as a true Catholic must.

41. For a Catholic "to follow one's conscience" is not, then, simply to act as his unguided reason dictates. "To follow one's conscience" and remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the magisterium. When doubt arises due to a conflict of "my" views and those of the magisterium, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the magisterium. "In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra* (*Lumen Gentium*, #25). And this must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of individual theologians or individual priests, however intelligent or persuasive.

PART FIVE

LAW AND CONSCIENCE

42. These positions bring us now to the delicate question of law, which is a regulating force in human and Christian action. The word itself is frequently used in various senses and we recognize the complexity of the subject.

Distinction of "Law" as Spirit and as Precept

43. Any Christian reflection on law must take into consideration the crucial distinction between law as precept and law as the dynamic structure of personal being.

44. With regard to the latter concept of law, the passage of St. Paul to the Romans quoted above (*Rom. 2:12-15*) illustrates this distinction by contrasting the importance of the precepts of the Mosaic Law with the fundamental belief of Christians that sinful rebellion has been radically - though not completely - healed. All forms of prescriptive law stand under the Spirit of love released when Christ, suffering in himself the consequences of the law, passed from death to life. As we have already stated (*Rom. 8:1-15*), any law is ultimately subject to that influx of the Spirit by which the redeemed are transformed into brothers of Christ enjoying the freedom of the children of God in his Spirit (*Rom. 8:15-17*). This operation of the indwelling Spirit of Christ, this conformity of our nature to Christ's word in our hearts, is the New Law. It is discipleship to this word which makes us free (*Jn. 8:31-32*).

45. This note of the freedom of the sons of God is crucial because it establishes the ultimate priority of personal conscience informed by the Spirit of Christ in the case of possible conflict with extrinsic law. God had promised that the New Law would be written in the person's heart, not on tablets of stone (*Jer. 31:31; Ex. 36:25*). Jesus teaches that the spirit of God's laws takes priority over the letter

(Mt. 5:20-48). The great teachers of the Christian tradition have re-echoed this centrality of the interior law of grace. "There on Sinai the finger of God wrote on stone tablets, here in the hearts of men with the sending of the Spirit and Pentecost" (Augustine, *De Spiritu et Littera*, XVII). The whole strength of the New Law and its specifically Christian meaning consists in its being written in the heart of man by the Spirit which is given through faith in Christ" (Aquinas, S.T., I-II, 106, 1 and 2; Gal. 3:21-22). In our day the supremacy of the voice of God making himself heard in the depths of the personal conscience has been reaffirmed, as already stated, by the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes* #16; *The Declaration on Religious Freedom*, #3).

Preceptive Law

46. Having established this as a fundamental principle, we can ask how prescriptive laws are to be judged by the conscience conformed to the indwelling Spirit which gives life. The new life of Christ in us is not yet fully accomplished. The preceptive law of legitimate authority must be taken into account in every moral decision because it has the right to command our assent and stands as a constant reminder of our sinfulness and of our dependence upon a source of life which transcends our individual selves. Moreover, it would be unthinkable that the Spirit, speaking in the heart of the redeemed Christian, would be in opposition to himself teaching in the authority established by Jesus.

47. It is in this context that we offer some considerations on prescriptive "law" in our lives.

48. In a society which finds it extremely difficult to accept any limitations upon even the grossest perversions of freedom, law has become a sort of whipping boy. Yet it can be said that the law is nothing more or less than an expression of conditions which must exist if man is to be free. Scripture has told us, "The truth shall make you free" (Jn.8:32). This idea could be extended to law when it is a good law since we are thus led to our best, liberating interests.

49. In particular, the presence of evil within us and the ability we have to explain away our most bizarre actions easily incline us to ignore facts and assume a false sense of values. It is precisely as an antidote to this sort of deception that laws have been formulated. In a statement of this necessarily limited scope, it is impossible for us to make all the necessary distinctions between divine law and natural law, civil and ecclesiastical law. We limit ourselves in saying that any law set up by legitimate authority and in conformity with divine law must be taken into account in every moral action.

50. Some, set by God in the very manner in which he has created us and the universe, are immutable and not subject to any exception. Such are the prohibitions against killing the innocent, adultery, theft, etc. Nor has basic morality changed over the years. The fundamental points of the Ten Commandments are as valid today as they were when Moses received them on Mount Sinai. Others are established by legitimate human authority to regulate and regularize our human relationships and to govern society whether civil or ecclesiastical. These presume the great laws of God and take them for granted as a basis for this obligatory nature.

51. In the same context, laws made for the proper government of the Church are required for the inter-relationships of the people of God and for the guidance of believers. In every case, they should postulate the law of love and be designed to assist us in its realization. A totally mature and saintly people would require a minimum of laws. But the Church is a pilgrim Church and a Church sent precisely to redeem sinners. The laws it promulgates are specifically to guide our feet away from the traps set by our sinfulness and our own tendencies to sin.

The Use of Exceptions

52. In particular, we warn our faithful people about the misuse of exceptions to the law in particular cases (called by moralists "epikeia"), a misuse which has now become so widespread as to threaten the whole structure of our moral lives. This misuse is very akin to the condition described above where some feel exempt from being told anything by anybody, an exaggeration and flagrant abuse of "I must form my own conscience."

53. It is understood that every law is for general condition and there may be situations in which a person not only is not bound to respond to the law but may not be able to do so. (We refer, of course, to matters which are covered by ecclesiastical law, by positive law, not to the great moral laws that have been given to us by God and, as stated, are without exception.) In exceptional circumstances, the true believer, understanding the law of love, has no feelings of guilt, but a certain regret in not being able to fulfil the law in this particular instance.

54. But the use of exceptions ("epikeia") has its requirements. And, as we have already intimated, the truly sincere person uses such a device only when absolutely necessary and regrets the need to be an exception in the community in this particular regard. One who understands that he has been commanded in love will respond in love and will not be a seeker of exceptions.

CONCLUSION

55. Such, we feel to be the major points upon which our present concern should bear. There is, of course, a great deal more that could be said about the conscience of man. Much, indeed, has been said and we refer our faithful people to the various pronouncements of the Pope, particularly in recent years, to the statements of a number of national hierarchies, and to the reaching of reliable theologians. In the present text we have striven only to place the problem of the formation of conscience in the contemporary situation and to deal with the major problems facing our people here.

56. We have tried to avoid legalism and to make, as basis of our considerations, the person of Christ, his teachings and his Spirit. Hence, the true Christian will far transcend these minimal observations and go deep into that country whose guide is the Spirit and whose sole law is love. But he will not go there against the mind of the Catholic Church but only in accordance with it and after he has been freed by it for the journey ahead (1 Jn. 4:16).