**MAKING MORAL CHOICES**

Cardinal Donald Wuerl

Every waking hour of our lives, we are constantly making decisions about what we do. In making moral choices, we are guided by our [**conscience**](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-jy/), that inner voice of the Spirit that keeps reminding us to do good even though there may be enticing reasons to do otherwise. This includes the decisions we make participating in public affairs. Furthermore, in determining whether a given personal action is itself morally good, we need to consider the goodness or lack thereof in: (a) the objective act, that is, what we actually do, (b) the subjective goal or our intention, and (c) the surrounding circumstances and consequences of a possible action (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* ([*CCC*) 1750](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-jj/)).

The first thing to consider is what we are choosing to do out of a variety of options. We choose this rather than that. This is “the primary and decisive element for moral judgment,” teaches Saint John Paul II, “which establishes whether [the act] is capable of being ordered to the good and to the ultimate end, which is God” *([Veritatis Splendor (VS), 79](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-jt/" \t "_blank)).* What we actually do should always be directed toward what is truly right and away from what is wrong.

We must not only do the good, we must have the will and intention of choosing the right thing. The reason we are doing it must be good. However, sincere good intentions cannot turn what is wrong into something good. Rather, the objective moral order exists independently of the power even of our free will.

The third element in making moral choices brings us to the circumstances. Here perhaps more than anywhere else, examples are presented with such emotional force that moral reasoning can be subverted. Like subjective intentions, the circumstances, including the consequences, are secondary elements of a moral act. They can lessen the gravity of an evil act or mitigate a person’s responsibility, such as when acting under coercion or ignorance, but circumstances “of themselves cannot change the moral quality of acts themselves; they can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil” (*CCC* [1735](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-ji/), [1754](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-jd/); [*VS, 77*](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-jh/)).

Part of this proper formation of conscience includes, as Pope Francis reminds us, presenting the teaching of the Church in its fullness and without compromise (cf. *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), no. 307) though in language which is welcoming rather than defensive or one-sided (cf. AL, nos. 36, 38). But a key part of discernment is the formation of conscience. The Holy Father insists that the Church’s pastors must “make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are ca­pable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (AL, no. 37).

Sometimes it can happen that it appears that every choice is morally problematic, that evil cannot be completely avoided. When stuck in this way “between a rock and a hard place,” we may be subject to “the art of the possible,” where all we can really do is seek to avoid or minimize the greater harm, and good and justice are achieved only partially.

For example, the U.S. bishops have noted that a conscientious voter faces a dilemma when all of the candidates hold a position that “promotes an intrinsically evil act.” In that situation, the voter exercising prudential judgment “may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods” ([Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, 36](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-jk/)).

We also have guidance from Saint John Paul II who in the context of a legislator considering abortion laws said that one may licitly choose acts “aimed at limiting the harm done” and “lessening its negative consequences.” He explained that “this does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects” (*[Evangelium Vitae, 73](http://zenitenglish.cmail20.com/t/d-l-dtlytid-htuiklkuj-ju/" \t "_blank)*).

Pope Francis also recalls for us that pastoral dialogue and accompaniment nurture the development of conscience. So, too, the expression of a level of support or confirmation for the judgment that the individual is making about the state of his soul or her soul is an aspect of pastoral ministry. However, the judgment of conscience is the act of the individual and is the basis for his or her accountability before God.

Life is certainly complex. Moral decisions can be difficult. But we need not fear, because we have a sure guide in making moral choices. Christ in his Church reveals to us the way. We also have the gifts of the Spirit to guide us and give us strength to do what we ought to do, to do good and avoid evil. In this way, we answer the call to holiness and help make the world a better place.

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