Voting by Conscience

By Father Brian Bransfield

The only difference between the voting booth and the conscience is we usually have to wait in line to get into one of them. Apart from that, the same thing is supposed to happen in each place as that small cubicle reveals me to myself.

You and I can only vote once in the election this fall. But before we do, hopefully we have repeatedly visited our own conscience. My conscience is what separates the voting machine from a slot machine, and only the human conscience can ensure that the ballot lever is not pulled on a gamble.

The U.S. bishops emphasize the role of conscience in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, a guide for Catholics as they prepare for the 2008 elections.

What does conscience look like? It is that part of me that is bigger than me. Many issues volley for attention: immigration; affordable education; war; neighborhood violence; health care; abortion; the hungry and homeless; the environment; human embryonic stem cell research; the dignity of marriage between one man and one woman as the most commonly recognized institution in history; economic inequality; gas prices; and the beat goes on.

The common misunderstanding is that conscience amounts to "what I think" on an issue. Conscience is not just "what I think," but it is me "thinking about what is just" and true. It is not a partial appraisal based on the words of a preacher, politician or passions. The inner moral sense is not built on a sum total of what I think, but is a manifestation linked with truth itself regardless of my preferences.

Conscience does not allow a citizen to forget he is first a *person*. It tells me I am a person, and, as such, I must look at a quandary according to a certain order: How does this act here and now, in and of itself, fit with *being human*, and not simply lower prices? Conscience insists that human dilemmas are *moral* concerns long before they are *political* points of view. Conscience tells me that to be free I must admit the truth that some acts are inescapably evil and no manner of circumstances or intentions can make them somehow good. Conscience bursts all other bubbles: It tells me the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, based not on the truth of circumstances or best intentions, but first and foremost on the truth of things in

themselves.

Conscience must be formed, and, as such, it looks in three directions at once: It looks at me, looks at the moral dilemma at hand, and it sees the truth of both without favor. So often the voter makes appeal to only to the first two categories, me and the dilemma. Mere opinion then substitutes for conscience. To make a decision in conscience is to consult the truth of the nature of things in themselves. Conscience begins “outside-in.” The objective reality summons accountability from me and forms the central coordinate of conscience. Conscience must begin with the true good. This starting point ensures that freedom and truth are not enemies.

There is a faculty deep within that I do not create. It is not programmed. This region is more than super ego or social convention. It is however, formed. The moral sense of conscience must be molded, not developed simply by feelings, opinions, circumstance, intentions or movements, but by the deep moral sense in which we participate by being human and capable of reason. Conscience does not simply decide for happy or sad, but for good or evil. Conscience lines up the quandaries in size order and sees the resemblance. Marriage, racism, the environment, hunger, and abortion are not competing events. They are cousins, if not siblings. Conscience refuses to let one of these become an “issue.”

Conscience winces when it hears a candidate claim that he can fix health care, but still agree that a child in the womb can be killed. Conscience knows that if a candidate favors human embryonic stem cell research, which always includes the killing of a human person, then our neighborhoods can never be free of violence – because we just voted for violence. The moral sense knows that if you treat the environment any way you like, sooner or later you will need treatment because of the environment. Conscience realizes that if you support torture you have just paid the deposit for a war twenty years from now.

Conscience sees broadly. It breaks the bubble, brushes back the curtain, pries down the lever, and by the leverage of honest truth can not simply change, but can transform, the world.

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