

Forming Conscience Thirty-third Week in Ordinary Time Saturday, November 25, 2017 8:15 AM **1 Mc 6:1-13;** Lk 20:27-40 (St. Catherine of Alexandria, virgin and martyr) (Forming conscience for a Christian means to think about Jesus as the true model of what it means to be human and to model one's life on Jesus.)

“Yet I was kindly and beloved in my rule.”

These are the words of Antiochus Epiphanes, who was actually a very cruel tyrant. This gives us occasion to think about the phenomenon we could call human conscience. **Human conscience is the capacity we have of discerning good from evil, which is related to a capacity we have to do God's will.** Without it we could not discern God's will. And yet for the most part **conscience is very poorly developed in most people.**

Here is Antiochus, who on reflection, realizing he is dying, talks about himself as a good and kindly leader. Whom was he talking about? Not himself. His image of himself was completely distorted. Sadly, he is not unique. **Our images of ourselves can be very distorted by our own imagination.** What we project may be our good intentions, and don't really look at our true performance. It is of course in the Book of Maccabees, which is Jewish, although not in the Jewish Bible, that he does come to realize, oh, but I really did something wrong because in Jerusalem I took all those vessels and I killed all those people. **So that started to prick his conscience, that one thing; but actually his whole life was like that. It was a pattern.**

Now today we have a phenomenon we are talking about all the time: sociopaths. **A sociopath by definition is a person without conscience, doesn't feel remorse—feel remorse.** That's part of conscience; it's not the whole thing. But a person who never feels remorse can't have much of a conscience. Now if you think about it and you observe carefully, you see that **people can have conscience and they can kill it.** For example, I remember an interview with a Mafia hit man. The interviewer said, “Well how can you just kill people in cold blood? Doesn't that bother your

conscience?” He said, “Oh, at first it did.” At first it did, but then after a while he got used to it. We get used to things. We get used to evil. **We become embedded in bad habits and then it doesn’t bother us.**

So conscience is not something that is absolutely overpowering; it’s not at all. It can be killed. **We can fail to form it in the first place.** And forming conscience for a Christian means to **think about Jesus as the true model of what it means to be human and to model one’s life on Jesus**, not just laws or commandments. They’re good, but just the beginning, not enough though. It is Christ himself who is the model for the Christian conscience.

And then we have to actually **become conscious of that model in the way we talk**, for example. Ephesians says, “Let no foul speech leave your mouths.” Why? Because that does not fit. If we are to live a life of Christ, we are to witness to Christ, then our speech has to model what Christ would say, and **our actions** have to model what Christ would do, and **our thinking** has to model what Christ would think, which means **we have to be people of prayer and we can’t be completely oblivious to the word of God in Scripture.** So forming conscience is a lifelong work. For a Christian it means becoming like Christ intentionally. That’s what true discipleship is: **intentional following of Christ**, and nothing less; but we see in the world a lot less.