

Pope Francis Urges More Reliance on Conscience

by Father John Catoir 7/21/16

Back in February of 2016, Pope Francis, in his ongoing effort to make the Church a port in the storm of life, broke with his predecessors on the issue of same sex marriage, saying that all Catholics have the right to follow a “well-formed conscience.” We always knew about a well-formed conscience, but we never heard it applied to this particular topic. His comment caused a controversy within the Church. Some protested, and some actually expanded on the idea.

Chicago’s Archbishop Blasé Cupich, the first episcopal appointment of Pope Francis in the US, said that divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, and those using contraceptives, should follow their own consciences in deciding whether to receive Holy Communion, or not.

Alarmed conservatives in the Vatican have been deeply divided over the Communion issue, as well as the acceptability of homosexuality, fearing that any relaxation of the traditional teachings threatens the Church’s broader stance on medical ethics. It is not my intention to argue these issues; I merely want to present a principle from moral theology, which has stood the test of time: 1. Unity in necessary things, 2. Freedom in doubtful things, and 3. Charity in all things.

In order for the Church to remain true to Jesus Christ, she must remain faithful to His core teachings. Doctrinal integrity is essential if the Church is to be the same for people in every century. She can’t change from century to century to satisfy the objections of each age. This requires constancy and clarity in matters of doctrine and moral theology.

Having said that, the Church has always taught:

1. “*Unity in necessary things*.” This means that each of us must try to stand fast in matters of faith. We make the necessary leap of faith even when to do so seems to go against logic. For instance, many deny that God is Love because they feel it doesn’t make sense in light of the on-going horrors in this world. But we are not rationalists who demand scientific evidence before we believe. We give assent to the mysteries and theological truths taught to us in divine revelation. Feelings are not facts in matters of faith. Once you accept the Creed, it means you believe that Jesus Christ is “true God and true man.” In making that leap of faith you accept the Catholic heritage.

2. “*Freedom in doubtful things*”. This principle brings us into the realm of morality. When doubts arise as to what is permissible, a Catholic has not only the right, but also the duty to follow a well-formed conscience. The human conscience does not replace the Church’s Magisterium; it merely applies the official teachings to one’s particular circumstances in life. For instance, on the issue of birth control, the great, late moral theologian, Father Bernard Haring put it this way:

Whoever can be convinced that the “absolute” forbidding of artificial means of birth control as stated by the encyclical Humanae vitae is the correct interpretation of divine law, must earnestly endeavor to live according to this conviction. Whoever, however, after serious reflection and prayer is convinced that in his or her case, such a prohibition could not be the will of God, should in peace in following his/her conscience, and not thereby feel like a second-class Catholic.” This reasoning applies to all moral dilemmas.

3. “*Charity in all things*.” All Catholics are part of the Mystical Body of Christ, the good and the bad. Jesus died for all sinners.