

Catholic

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YOUR CONSCIENCE AND CHURCH TEACHING HOW DO THEY FIT TOGETHER?

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Many Catholics get dizzy when they see disagreement in the Church over such moral issues as birth control, divorce, the role of women, or immigration. How are we supposed to deal with the confusing relationship between personal conscience and official Church teaching?

Public disagreement with Church teaching on contraception, for example, is disturbing to many Catholics. Further disturbance arises when theologians publicly disagree with official Church teaching and, in general, urge greater freedom of conscience.

Why should there be ambiguity and confusion? How do we cope with it or live with it—or even come to understand it? How can all of us in the Church—whether individual Catholics, pastors or preachers, theologians, bishops, or pope—work together to understand and apply gospel values to our decisions? I hope to answer these questions and shed some light on the complex link between our personal consciences and Church teaching.

A DIFFERENCE IN APPROACH

In the beginning, we must realize that there is an important difference between gospel values themselves (the *content* of Church teaching) and the way they are proclaimed (the *method* of Church teaching). A major reason for confusion today is that we are in a transitional period, caught in a



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clash between two competing *methods* of arriving at moral principles: the “classical” and the “personal.” These two methods are not contradictory, but they are very different, and each has something to teach us. They are based on different ways of looking at reality.

1. The classical method. The goal of the classical method is to capture what is universally true—for all people, all times, all circumstances. From the concrete and complex circumstances of everyday life, it deliberately abstracts—or draws forth, to use a less philosophical term—the *nature* or *essence* of the matter.

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