

Moral Decision-Making, Conscience Formation, and Pastoral Care

Melanie Barrett, PhD, STD
Chairperson and Professor of Moral Theology
University of St. Mary of the Lake, Mundelein Seminary

For Aquinas, conscience is not a separate faculty but the act by which human reason applies the relevant moral principles to a particular case in order to make a moral decision. To avoid error, one needs both the intellectual virtue of prudence and key moral virtues. “Formation of conscience” therefore requires not only specific moral instruction but also moral exemplars who teach virtue through the witness of their lives. Because family members, friends, one’s parish community, and the broader society all contribute to this task—either well or poorly—the Church’s influence is necessarily limited: especially when its teaching is counter-cultural. To be effective in this context, pastoral care must present not only what the Church teaches and why, but also in a manner that is both aesthetically appealing—illuminating the inherent beauty of the truth—and loving: by striking the correct balance between affirming the person and challenging them.