

GATHERING...

2

We Make Moral Choices

“The aim . . . is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.”

(1 Timothy 1:5)

+ **Leader:** Lord, our lives are filled with important choices that we can make in response to your great love. We ask you to guide us through these many important decisions as we pray together.

All: I praise you as my constant helper and call on you as my loving protector.

Guide me by your wisdom, correct me with your justice, comfort me with your mercy, protect me with your power.

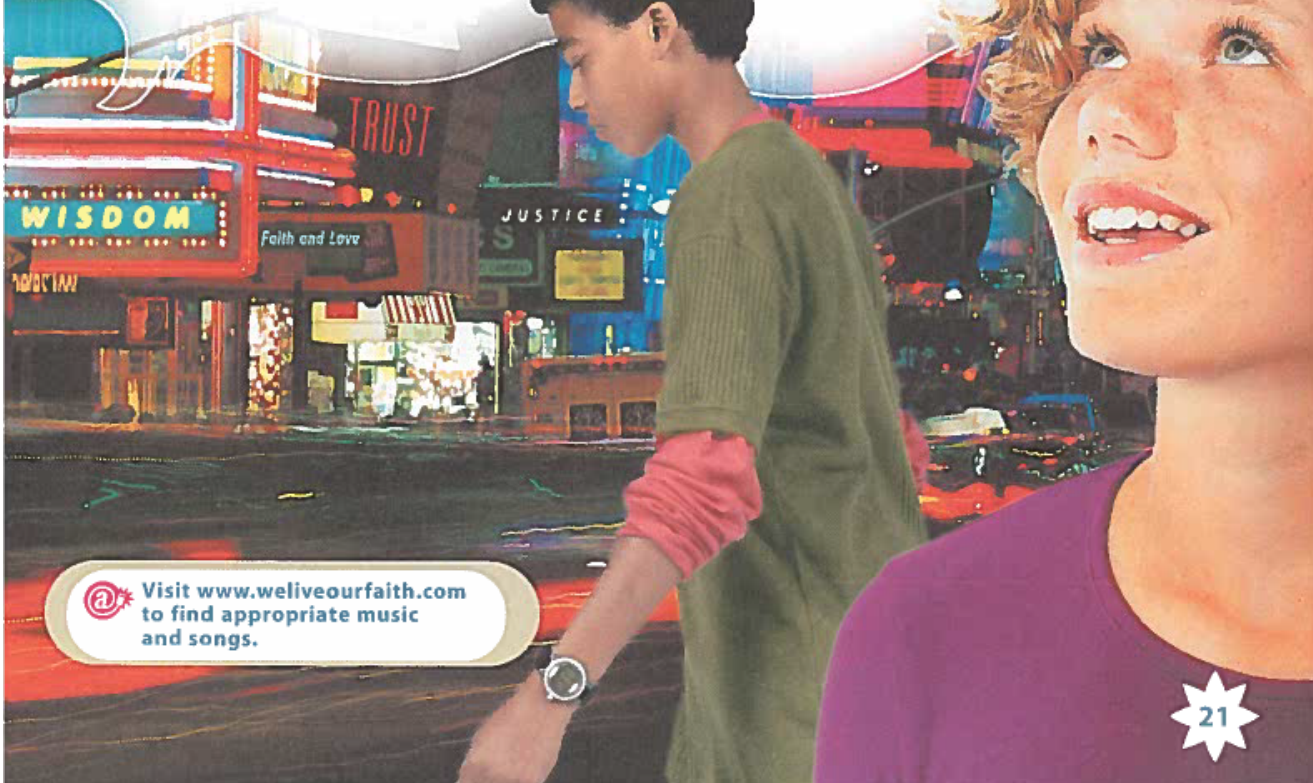
I want to do what you ask of me: in the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith. I trust in you: strengthen my trust. I love you: let me love you more and more.

Amen.

(from the “Universal Prayer,” attributed to Pope Clement XI)

CONSCIENCE



@ Visit www.weliveourfaith.com to find appropriate music and songs.

BELIEVING...

Our conscience helps us to make good moral decisions.

Throughout our lives we constantly face choices between right and wrong, good and evil, eternal life and sin. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to choose actions that show our love for God, others, and ourselves. And the process by which we make these choices is called **moral decision-making**.

Faith Word
moral decision-making

God has given each of us the gift of conscience to help us to make decisions and to judge our decisions and our actions. Our conscience helps us to determine the morality of our actions—that is, whether our actions are right or wrong, good or sinful. Conscience is the inner voice that can guide us in making good moral decisions, choices that bring us closer to God and one another. "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths." (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 16)

As we make moral decisions, our conscience is at work:

- before we make decisions, helping us to know what is good and to consider the results of our possible choices
- during the decision-making process, bringing the feelings of peace or discomfort, depending on the choices we are making

- after we have made decisions, enabling us to judge as good or evil the decisions that we have made and to accept responsibility for our choices.

Thus, our conscience is our moral compass, directing us in our moral decision-making. And relying on our conscience is a powerful expression of our dignity as human beings made in the image and likeness of God. To deny the voice of our conscience is to lose our dignity and to forget who we really are. As the Catechism reminds us, "Living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person" (1706).

Activity One way that our conscience can help us during the decision-making process is by bringing a feeling of peace when we have chosen what is good, or a feeling of discomfort when we have made a sinful choice. Under the appropriate heading below, list other feelings associated with making choices.

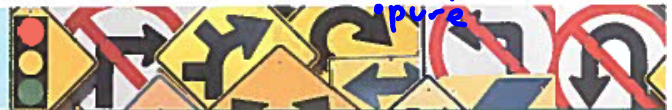
Making a sinful choice



Choosing what is good

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nervous • afraid • hurting (internal) • agony • anger • despicable • sadness • guilty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relieved • happiness/joy • helpful • pride • forgiveness • peace • satisfied • love • respect • holiness • springful • pure |
|--|--|

How can we tell if an act is morally good?



To determine the morality of an act, it is helpful to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and ask what Jesus would call us to do. We can also consider three specific elements of the act, asking ourselves:

1 What is the "object" of the act? What is the nature of the act itself? Is the act itself good or is the act by its very nature wrong?

2 What is the "intention" of the act? What is the purpose of committing the act? Is the act meant to do good for others, or is it selfish or hurtful to others?

3 What are the "circumstances" of the act? What are the act's consequences or results—harm or good?

For any act to be morally good, its object, intention, and circumstances must all be good.

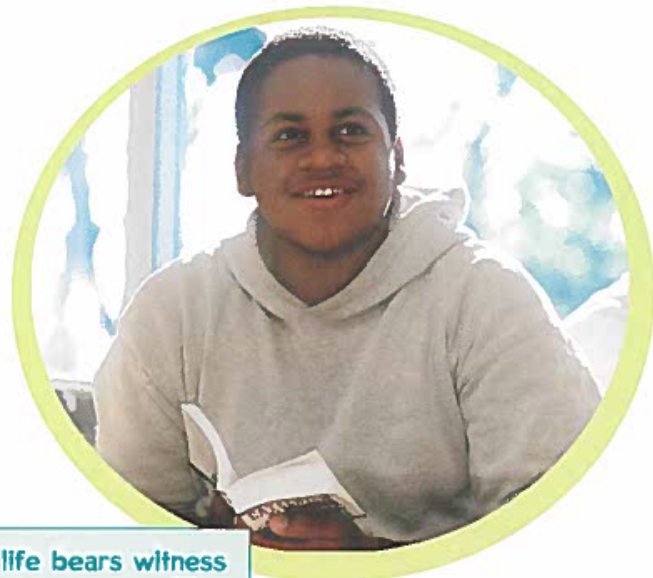
Thus, even if our intentions are good, if the act itself is not by its very nature a good act, then it cannot be judged morally good. And some acts, by their very nature, are always wrong to choose—no matter what the intentions or circumstances.

Can you think of some examples?

- Stealing (from rich to give to poor)
- Capital Punishment
- Lying ("bear false witness")

We are responsible for forming our conscience.

Determining what is good and what is sinful may not always be easy. Because sin and its effects are very real in our world, **there are many negative influences in life that can affect our conscience.** Peer pressure or popular culture may try to convince us that certain things are good when they're not. And there may be other factors that can cause our conscience to have the wrong information. Acting on this information may cause us to make sinful choices. So, to be able to rely on our conscience for help, we need it to clearly tell us what is sinful and what is good. It must be a **well-formed conscience, a conscience that is educated so that it is able to recognize what is good and then direct us to act on that good.**



“Living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person.”
(CCC, 1706)

Acting against our conscience is acting against ourselves,

A well-formed conscience helps us to follow the teachings of Christ, living as his disciples and growing closer to the Blessed Trinity and to one another. But a well-formed conscience does not come naturally. We continue to form it throughout life. And the Church teaches that we are obliged to do so. **It is our responsibility to seek the guidance of God's word in Scripture, to listen to the teachings of the pope and bishops, to fill our minds and hearts with the love and wisdom of our Catholic faith, to look to the guidance of faithful Catholics among us, and to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.** These are all sources that help to form our conscience, bringing it reliable information that can be used in making right judgments.

Faith Word
well-formed conscience

Forming our conscience prepares us to make good moral decisions. Acting on those good moral decisions also strengthens and develops our conscience. **If we fail to care for our conscience and continually act against it, we can weaken and even eventually destroy our conscience.** In our lives we may have already seen or felt the effects of people who seem to have “no conscience.”

because our conscience represents our dignity, our character, and our honor and integrity as persons created by God. And though it may take courage to be the persons God created us to be, when we act in good conscience, we are never alone: God is always guiding us.

Activity The verses of the psalm below ask God for help and guidance. For each verse, write your own response. Then pray the verses together, saying responses chosen by your group from among those written.

Reader: “Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light for my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

All: _____

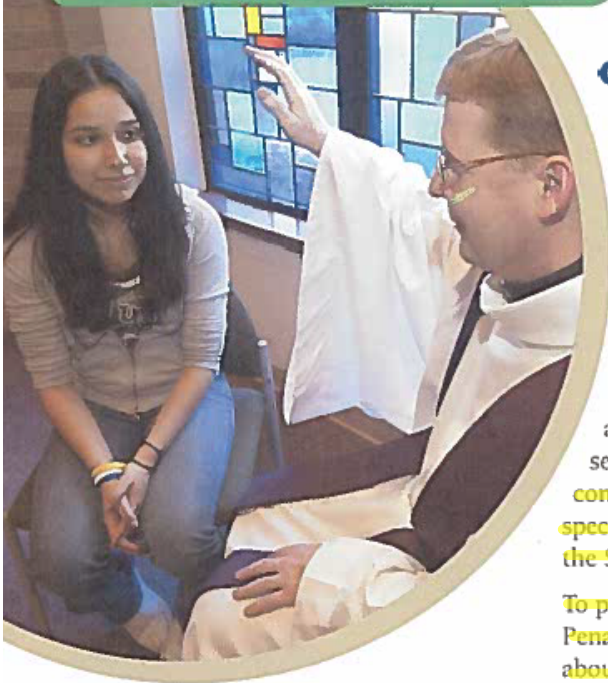
Reader: “I have examined my ways
and turned my steps to your
decrees.” (Psalm 119:59)

All: _____

Reader: “You are good and do what is good;
teach me your laws.” (Psalm 119:68)

All: _____

BELIEVING...



God gives us the gifts of forgiveness and grace.

What happens when we don't choose to do what is right?

In life there are many decisions that we need to make and many tough choices that we face. We can always talk to God about our fears and uncertainties. We can listen as the Holy Spirit guides us and strengthens us. We can also seek the guidance of those who show faithfulness in their discipleship to Christ and wisdom in their moral decision-making. Yet, sometimes, even with all this help, we can fail and give in to the temptation to sin. But God in his mercy sent Jesus Christ, his only Son, to save us from sin. And God continues to show his mercy, his love and forgiveness, through a special Sacrament of Healing that Jesus Christ gave to the Church, the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

To prepare for this sacrament, commonly called the Sacrament of Penance, we examine our conscience. This means that we think about whether our decisions were based on the actions and teachings of Jesus. We determine whether or not our choices have shown love for God, others, and ourselves. And we ask the Holy Spirit to help us to judge the goodness of our thoughts, words, and actions.

Through the Sacrament of Penance we can be reconciled with God and with the Church. We go before a priest who acts in Jesus' name, and we acknowledge our sins. These sins may be acts, wrongs that we have committed, or omissions, failures to do the good that we were called to do. We then express our sorrow for any wrongdoing or any lack of love for God and others. We show repentance by promising not to repeat our sins and by taking action to show that we are truly sorry for our sins.

In a special way, through the Sacrament of Penance, we receive not only the gift of God's forgiveness, but the gift of his grace. "Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us." (CCC, 2003) God's grace helps us to make good moral decisions, to lead good moral lives, and to resist the temptation to sin. Thus, our relationship with God and the Church is strengthened or restored. Through the grace that we receive in this and all the sacraments, we, all the members of the Church, are enabled to live as God calls us to live.

Activity Design a feature for your parish Web site inviting people to receive the Sacrament of Penance.

The effects of Penance

The Sacrament of Penance has these wonderful effects in our lives:

- restoring or strengthening our relationship with God
- reconciling us with the Church
- excusing us from eternal punishment for the mortal sins repented
- lessening the purification necessary for our sins after death
- granting us peace and serenity of conscience
- comforting us
- strengthening us to continue living a moral life.

Even if we have not committed mortal sin, we are encouraged to receive the Sacrament of Penance regularly. It helps us to grow in our ability to make good moral decisions.

Pray a prayer of thanks for the Sacrament of Penance.

CATHOLIC IDENTITY

Jesus calls the whole Church to follow his example.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our unity as the Church strengthens us as we follow Jesus' teachings together, receive the grace of the sacraments, and grow in holiness. **Strengthened by the Eucharist, sustained by the word of God in the liturgy, and guided by the Holy Spirit and Church teachings, we continue our lives of discipleship.** And as the community of Jesus' disciples, the Church, we are called to be aware of the effects of our sins on the human community.

Created in God's image, we all share the same human dignity. This makes us one human community. **And we must realize that while choosing to disobey God and failing to love him may be a personal sin, over time these personal sins affect the entire human community.**

These sins can give rise to "structures of sin," to unjust situations and conditions that negatively impact society and its institutions. This is

social sin. Prejudice, poverty, homelessness, crime, violence, and discrimination against people on the basis of their race or ethnicity are just a few of the unjust situations and conditions in society that sin has caused.

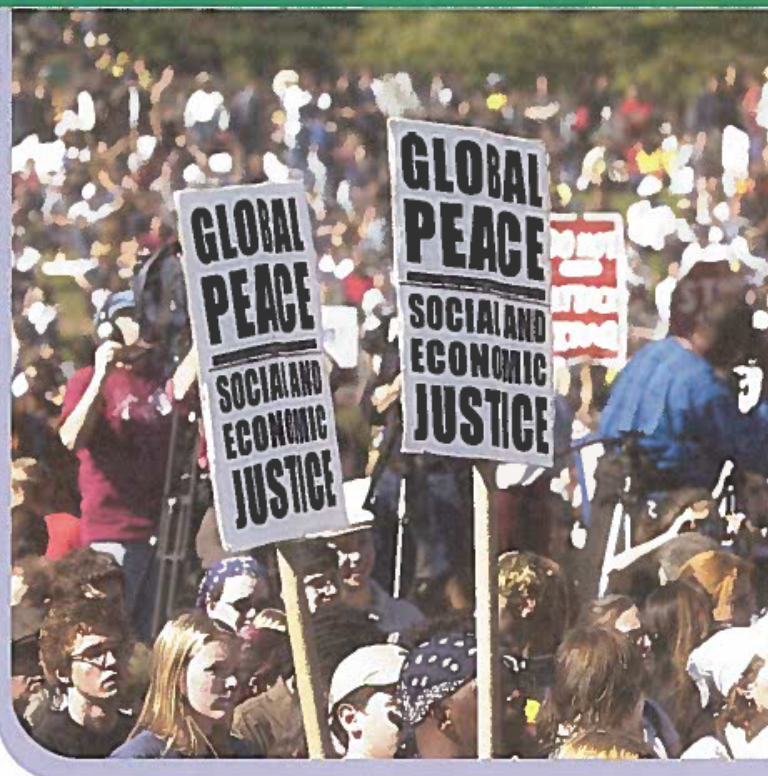
Faith Word

social sin

During his lifetime Jesus recognized the problems in society. And Jesus took action:

- Jesus stood up for those treated unjustly because they were ill or poor.
- Jesus protected people who could not protect themselves.
- Jesus offered the peace and freedom that come from God's love and forgiveness.

As Jesus' disciples, each of us is called to follow his example in word and deed. So, we must be aware



"Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us."

(CCC, 2003)

of all of our sins, asking God for mercy and opposing all social sin in the same way that we avoid personal sin. **We are called, in whatever way possible for us, to work to change the things in society that allow unjust behaviors or**

conditions to exist. We don't have to say yes to sin, either personally or as a society; Jesus has liberated us from its power.

In the same way that Jesus worked among the people—teaching them about the love of God his Father and encouraging them to turn to God—the Church, the whole community of Jesus' disciples, is called to work among the people. **And one of the ways that the Church does this is by speaking out against social sin and encouraging all people to turn to God and love and respect one another throughout their lives.**

Activity Find out how programs in your parish or diocese are helping to address unjust situations in society. Brainstorm ways to support these programs.

RESPONDING...

Recognizing Our Faith

Recall the question at the beginning of this chapter: *How do I make decisions?* How have your thoughts and feelings about ways to make decisions changed since beginning this chapter? Make a checklist or a flowchart that you can refer to for help in making moral decisions.

Living Our Faith

In this chapter we learned that God gives us the help that we need to make good moral decisions. In what ways will you use this help the next time you are faced with a difficult decision?

Saint Catherine of Siena



Catherine devoted her life to God and the Church. **She became a member of the Dominican religious order and worked to help those in need in Siena, Italy, in the fourteenth century.** Through her work, her wisdom and decision-making skills became well known. People sought her out to settle disputes. She also wrote about spirituality and **theology, the study of God and religious faith.** Her writings and wisdom influenced many people, including the pope, who was living in exile in France.

Partners in FAITH

Long before Catherine's birth, the pope and his advisors had moved from Rome to Avignon, France. This exile created a division that was threatening the Church. Catherine met with the pope to convince him and his advisors to move the papacy back to Rome. The pope heeded her advice. The papacy returned to Rome, where it remains today.

Saint Catherine of Siena is a Doctor of the Church. Her feast day is April 29.

Catherine of Siena used her wisdom to help others make wise decisions. How can you help others to do the same?

@* For additional ideas and activities, visit www.weliveourfaith.com.

Putting Faith to Work

Talk about what you have learned in this chapter:



We know that our conscience is our moral compass, directing us in our moral decision-making.



We care for our conscience by forming it well and also by doing what is right.



We follow Jesus not only by making good personal decisions but also by working to end unjust behaviors and conditions in society.

Decide on ways to live out what you have learned.



ENCOUNTERING GOD'S WORD



“Entrust your works to the LORD, and your plans will succeed.”
(Proverbs 16:3)

“Trust in the LORD and he will help you.”
(Proverbs 20:22)

- ➔ **READ** the quotations from Scripture.
- ➔ **REFLECT** on the following question:
How can these words help someone who needs to make a moral decision?
- ➔ **SHARE** your reflections with a partner.
- ➔ **DECIDE** to seek God's help before making a moral decision.

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

- Our _____ guides us to make good moral decisions.
 a. **conscience** b. social sin c. forgiveness d. personal sin
- Created in God's image, we all share the same _____, and are one human community.
 a. omissions b. well-formed conscience c. **human dignity** d. social sin
- _____ is unjust situations and conditions that negatively impact society and its institutions.
 a. Moral decision-making b. **Social sin** c. A well-formed conscience d. Human dignity
- In a special way, through the Sacrament of Penance, we receive the gift of God's forgiveness and the gift of _____.
 a. **grace** b. human dignity c. moral compass d. moral decision-making

Complete the following.

examine our conscience

- To prepare for the Sacrament of Penance, we _____
- During the decision-making process our conscience is at work: _____ bringing a feeling of peace when we choose what is good, or a feeling of discomfort when we make a sinful choice
- A well-formed conscience recognizes what is good and then directs us to act on that good
- Moral decision-making is the process by which we make choices that show our love for God, others, and ourselves.

9–10. **ESSAY:** How can the Sacrament of Penance help us in our efforts to live moral lives?

The Sacrament of Penance can help us in our efforts to live moral lives by restoring or strengthening our relationship with God, reconciling us with the church, excusing us from eternal punishment for the mortal sins repented, lessening the purification necessary for our sins after death, granting us peace and serenity of conscience, comforting us, and strengthening us to continue living a moral life. We receive the gift of grace, which helps us to make good moral decisions, to lead good moral lives, and to resist the temptation to sin. (p. 26)