THE DAILY BREAD

The Creed of the Apostles



Conscience & the Moral Life

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

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Conscience

Formation, Not Feeling

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INTRODUCTION

The One Commandment the Age Still Keeps

The modern world, which prides itself on having outgrown commandments, has quietly kept one, and preaches it with a fervor the old religions would envy. You hear it everywhere, in films and graduation speeches and the advice of well-meaning friends: follow your heart. Do what feels right to you. Be true to yourself. Let no one tell you what is right or wrong for you; you alone are the author of your own morality. It is the single moral absolute of an age that claims to have no absolutes, and it sounds like freedom.

It is, in fact, one of the most destructive lies a man can build his life on, and it is the exact opposite of what the Church means by conscience. The culture hears the Catholic emphasis on conscience and assumes the Church agrees with it, that conscience means following your own inner sense of things. It means nearly the reverse. For the Church, conscience is real, serious, and binding, the most sacred core of a man where he is alone with God. But precisely because it is so serious, it is not a feeling to be followed blindly. It is a judgment to be formed, carefully, over a lifetime, according to a truth a man does not invent but receives.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God. — Romans 12:2

This is the most culturally urgent station in the whole program, because here the faith collides head-on with the one doctrine the age holds sacred. A man navigating a real life, with its genuine moral complexity in his marriage, his business, his politics, and his parenting, needs more than the slogan to follow his heart, which collapses the moment his heart wants two contradictory things or wants something that will destroy him. He needs a conscience he can trust, which means a conscience that has been formed. We will look at what conscience actually is, the duty to form it, where it is formed, the law written into the world and into the heart, the commandments that map the good life, and how to act when a man is genuinely unsure. The aim is a man whose conscience is neither a weathervane turning with his feelings nor a megaphone for the culture, but a true and reliable guide.

CHAPTER ONE

What Conscience Actually Is

The Voice That Is Not a Feeling

Everything goes wrong from the start if a man misunderstands what conscience is, and nearly everyone today misunderstands it in the same way. We have reduced conscience to a feeling, a gut sense, an inner voice of preference that tells a man what he is comfortable with. On that view, to consult your conscience is to consult your feelings, and to follow your conscience is to do what sits well with you. This is not conscience. It is mood wearing conscience's clothes.

The Modern Misunderstanding

The trouble with locating conscience in the feelings is that feelings are precisely the thing most easily corrupted, manipulated, and deceived. A man can feel perfectly at peace about a grave wrong he has rationalized, and deeply uneasy about something that is in fact his duty. The con man feels no guilt; the scrupulous saint feels guilt over nothing. If conscience were a feeling, then the man with the deadest conscience, who feels fine about everything, would be the most virtuous, which is absurd. Feelings can accompany conscience, but they are not it, and a man who steers by them is steering by an instrument that whichever way he has trained it, or whichever way his appetites are pulling, will happily point.

Conscience Defined

Conscience, as the Church understands it, is a judgment of reason. It is the act by which a man applies his knowledge of what is good and evil to a concrete, particular choice in front of him, and judges: this specific act, here, now, is right, or is wrong, and I must do it, or must avoid it. Notice that it is a judgment, an act of the reason, not a feeling of the gut. And notice what it depends on: it depends on a man's knowledge of good and evil, the moral truth he brings to the judgment. This is the whole key to everything that follows. A judgment is only as good as the knowledge it draws on. A conscience is only as reliable as it is well-informed. Which means conscience is not a faculty a man simply has and consults, like checking a gauge. It is a judgment he makes, and the quality of that judgment depends entirely on what he has put into it.

An image helps. Conscience is like a judge in a courtroom. A judge does not invent the law; he receives it, studies it, and then applies it faithfully to the particular case before him. A good judge is one who knows the law well and applies it honestly; a bad judge is one who is ignorant of the law, or who bends it to favor the party he likes. Conscience is that judge in the courtroom of a man's soul, applying the moral law to the specific case of this choice. And just as we would never say a judge is free to decide the law is whatever he feels it should be, so conscience is not free to invent morality. Its dignity lies precisely in

being a faithful judge of a law it did not write, and its whole competence depends on how well it knows that law. A man forms his conscience the way a man becomes a good judge: by long and honest study of the law he serves.

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness. — Romans 2:14-15

The Law Written on the Heart

And yet conscience is not merely a human opinion, for underneath a man's particular judgments lies something he did not put there. Paul observes that even the pagans, who never received the revealed law of Moses, nonetheless show the work of that law written on their hearts, accusing or excusing them through their conscience. There is in every human being, prior to all teaching, a basic awareness that good is to be done and evil avoided, and some grasp of what the broad strokes of each are. This is the voice of God echoing in the depths of a man, the most secret core and sanctuary where he is alone with God and hears God's call. It is real, it is from God, and it is why no man is finally without excuse. But this innate core is a seed, not a finished tree. It tells a man that there is a difference between right and wrong and sets him seeking it; it does not, by itself, settle every particular question. That requires formation, and formation is the work of a lifetime.

CHAPTER TWO

The Duty You Were Never Told About

The Obligation to Form Your Conscience

Here is the step the culture omits entirely, and its omission is the whole problem. Everyone today will tell a man to follow his conscience. Almost no one will tell him he has a grave and prior duty to form it. Yet without that duty, following your conscience is as likely to lead a man into evil as out of it, because a deformed conscience followed faithfully leads faithfully into the ditch.

A Conscience Can Be Wrong

Start with the fact the slogan ignores: a conscience can be mistaken. A man can judge, sincerely, that a wrong thing is right, and sincerity does not make him correct. History is full of men who did monstrous things with a clear conscience, genuinely convinced they were right, and their sincerity is no defense of the deeds. Closer to home, every man can

recall things he once felt fine about and later saw were wrong, which proves his conscience was mistaken even while it felt certain. A conscience is not infallible simply because it is sincere. It can be badly formed, half formed, or deformed by rationalization, bad teaching, and the slow pressure of a man's own appetites, which are endlessly inventive in persuading him that what he wants is what is right.

This last source of error is the one a man must watch most closely in himself, because it is the most intimate and the most dishonest. The appetites do not announce themselves as appetites; they disguise themselves as reasons. The man who wants to do a thing he half suspects is wrong does not usually say, I will do this wrong thing because I want to. He constructs, quickly and almost unconsciously, a case for why it is not really wrong in his situation, why the usual rule does not quite apply to him, why everyone does it, why the harm is not so great. This is the conscience being bribed by the will, and it is the commonest way a basically decent man talks himself into evil. The remedy is a ruthless honesty about one's own motives and, again, the willingness to submit the convenient conclusion to someone outside oneself, who has no stake in the verdict.

I Followed My Conscience Is Not Enough

This is why the great modern trump card, I followed my conscience, settles far less than a man thinks. It is true that a man must follow his certain conscience; he may never act against his own settled judgment that something is wrong. But he is responsible for the conscience he followed. If his judgment was wrong because he never bothered to learn the truth, never sought it, preferred the comfortable answer and avoided the sources that would have corrected him, then the resulting error is his fault, and the harm done under its banner is on his account. The Church distinguishes between the man whose conscience errs through no fault of his own, who genuinely could not have known better, and the man whose conscience errs because he did not care to know better. The first is excused. The second is not, and I followed my conscience does not save him, because he had a duty to form the conscience he so conveniently followed.

So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. — Acts 24:16

The Work of a Lifetime

Forming a conscience, then, is not a thing a man does once and finishes. It is lifelong labor, the patient, ongoing work of bringing his moral judgment ever more into line with the truth, of filling the reason that makes the judgments with real moral knowledge, of correcting the distortions his own heart keeps introducing. Paul says he takes pains, continually, to keep a clear conscience, and the phrase is honest: it takes pains, effort,

work, an active seeking of the truth rather than a passive trust in one's own gut. A man who assumes his conscience is reliable simply because it is his has not yet begun. The serious Christian treats the forming of his conscience as one of the central tasks of his life, because he knows that on the quality of that formation hangs the quality of every moral choice he will ever make.

CHAPTER THREE

Where a Conscience Is Formed

The Sources a Man Cannot Do Without

If conscience must be formed, the practical question is where, and by what. A man cannot form his conscience by consulting himself, which is only to polish the very instrument that needs correcting. He forms it by bringing it into contact with a truth larger than himself, and the Church names the sources from which that truth comes. A man serious about his conscience goes to them deliberately and keeps going.

Not From Within Alone

The first thing to see is that formation comes from outside the self. This runs directly against the age, which locates all moral authority within the individual and treats any external standard as an imposition on his freedom. But a man cannot be the source and the judge of his own moral truth any more than he can be his own physician in a matter beyond his knowledge; he needs to receive what he does not already possess. To form a conscience is to submit it, humbly, to teachers greater than oneself, and the humility of that submission is itself the beginning of wisdom. The man who will take moral correction from no one outside himself has not achieved freedom. He has only guaranteed that his errors will never be fixed.

Scripture and the Church

The first and greatest source is the Word of God in Scripture, the lamp to a man's feet, where God has spoken plainly about how his creatures are to live. A conscience steeped in the Scriptures, read prayerfully and often, is a conscience being formed by God himself. The second is the teaching of the Church, the Magisterium, which Christ established precisely to hand on and safeguard his moral teaching through the centuries, so that a man is not left to interpret the Scriptures alone and in isolation. The Church's moral teaching, including the hard parts a man would rather not hear, is not an obstacle to a free conscience but the gift that forms a true one. When the Church teaches that

something is gravely wrong, she is not imposing an opinion; she is handing a man the accumulated moral wisdom of two thousand years, guarded by the Holy Spirit, as a mother hands her son hard-won truth she does not want him to learn the hard way.

It is worth facing squarely the modern objection that submitting one's conscience to the Church is a surrender of one's own judgment, a refusal to think for oneself. The opposite is true. A man who insists on reaching every moral conclusion entirely on his own, from scratch, refusing all received wisdom, is not thinking for himself; he is cutting himself off from the greatest resource any thinker could have, the tested moral reasoning of the wisest minds and holiest lives across twenty centuries. No serious man approaches medicine or engineering by discarding everything known before him and starting fresh with his own feelings. He masters the accumulated knowledge first, and only then can he contribute. To form one's conscience by the Church is not to stop thinking; it is to think with the whole Church rather than alone in the cramped room of one's own era and experience, and it is the furthest thing from intellectual laziness. It is intellectual humility, which is the condition of ever learning anything at all.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. — Psalm 119:105

Natural Law and the Counsel of the Wise

Alongside these stands the natural law, which we will take up fully in the next chapter, the moral truth written into human nature itself and legible to honest reason. And alongside all of them stands the humble and ancient practice of seeking counsel, bringing one's real moral questions to men wiser and holier than oneself, to a good confessor, to a trusted spiritual guide, to the saints through their writings. A man forming his conscience does not do it alone in his own head. He reads the Scriptures, he submits to the Church, he reasons honestly about the nature God gave him, and he seeks the counsel of the wise, and from all of these, over years, a reliable conscience is slowly built. The man who draws on all these sources is forming a conscience he can actually trust; the man who draws on none of them and still speaks confidently of following his conscience is following something, but it is not that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Written Into the World

The Natural Law

Men often assume the Church's moral teaching is a list of divine preferences, arbitrary rules God happened to choose and could have chosen differently, so that morality is finally a matter of obeying commands for their own sake. This misunderstands the whole thing, and the correction is one of the most liberating truths a man can learn. The Church's morality is not arbitrary. It is rooted in reality, in what human beings actually are and what they are made for, and the name for this is the natural law.

The Grain of Reality

The natural law is the moral order built into human nature itself, the truth about what makes a human being flourish or fail, discoverable in principle by reason because it is written into the way we are actually made. Moral laws, in this understanding, are not like the arbitrary rules of a game, which could have been written otherwise, but like the grain in a piece of wood or the laws of physics, descriptions of how reality actually works. A man who acts against the natural law is not merely breaking a rule and risking a penalty; he is cutting against the grain of his own being, and the splintering that follows is not an arbitrary punishment imposed from outside but the natural consequence of fighting the way he was made. Lie habitually, and you corrode your own capacity for communion. Use others, and you wither your own ability to love. The commandments describe the grain. Sin is the splintering.

This is also why the consequences of sin are so often not external penalties but the inward unraveling of the sinner himself, whether or not he is ever caught. The adulterer may never be discovered, and still his capacity for faithful love is damaged; the liar may never be exposed, and still his grip on reality and his ability to be truly known by anyone quietly erodes. God does not need to add a punishment from outside, because the act carries its consequence within it, as surely as a man who jumps from a height is not arbitrarily punished by the ground. This is a sobering truth and a strangely hopeful one. Sobering, because it means no secret sin is ever really without cost. Hopeful, because it means the moral law is not a trap set to catch a man but a map of the terrain of his own flourishing, and every hard commandment is God pointing and saying, not there; that way lies the cliff.

Why Everyone Can Know It

Because the natural law is written into human nature, it is in principle accessible to every human being, not only to those who have received revelation. This is what Paul meant about the pagans having the law written on their hearts. Every culture in history, however it differed in details, has known that murder is wrong, that cowardice is shameful, that we owe something to our parents, that there is a difference between the

just man and the thief. This deep, cross-cultural moral agreement is the fingerprint of the natural law, the common inheritance of a shared human nature. It means the Church, in teaching morality, is not imposing a sectarian code on outsiders but articulating, clarifying, and completing a law that is already, dimly, in every honest heart. And it means a man can appeal to it in conversation with those who share none of his faith, because at bottom they already know more of it than they admit.

For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you… But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. — Deuteronomy 30:11,14

The Freedom of Living With the Grain

This transforms how a man understands the moral life, turning it from a cage into a path. The modern man imagines freedom as the absence of all constraint, the power to do absolutely anything he wants, and he therefore experiences every moral law as a wall closing in on his freedom. But this is a child's idea of freedom. Real freedom is not the power to act against your nature; it is the power to become what you are meant to be. A fish is not freed by being lifted out of the water, and a man is not freed by being released from the moral law that is the very grain of his flourishing. He is destroyed by it, slowly. The commandments are not the walls of a prison. They are the banks of the river, and a river without banks is not a freer river; it is a swamp. To live with the grain of the natural law is to run deep and fast and clean, which is the only freedom worth the name.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ten Words

The Commandments as the Map of a Good Life

The natural law finds its clearest and most famous summary in the Ten Commandments, the ten words God gave at Sinai. Most men know them as a list of prohibitions, a catalog of thou shalt nots, and dread them accordingly. Seen rightly, they are something far better: the maker's own summary of how a human being is built to live, and the charter of a free people.

Not Ten Restrictions, but Ten Freedoms

Notice first when and to whom they were given. God did not hand the commandments to slaves to keep them in line; he gave them to a people he had just set free, leading them

out of slavery in Egypt, as the way of life that would keep them free. The commandments open not with a demand but with a liberation: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Everything that follows is the shape of the free life, the way a people stays free rather than falling back into bondage, now to Pharaoh, now to their own appetites and idols. A man who keeps them is not being restrained; he is being kept from the slaveries that would otherwise reclaim him. They are ten freedoms disguised, to the careless eye, as ten restrictions.

The First Three: Loving God

The commandments divide naturally into two tablets. The first three order a man's relationship to God, because every other right relationship depends on this one being right. You shall have no other gods: the command to keep God first, and to tear down the idols, money, status, pleasure, self, that forever try to take his place. You shall not take his name in vain: the call to reverence, to treat the holy as holy in a world that profanes everything. And keep holy the Lord's Day: the command, widely abandoned even by believers, to give God the first day of the week, to rest from labor and to worship, to refuse the tyranny of endless work and ceaseless activity. A man who thinks Sunday Mass and Sunday rest are optional has quietly rejected one of the ten words, and he usually finds that a life which gives God no dedicated time slowly gives him no real place at all.

The Last Seven: Loving Neighbor

The remaining seven order a man's dealings with his neighbor, and they translate with unnerving directness into modern life. Honor your father and mother, and beyond them all legitimate authority and the debt owed to those who gave and shaped your life. You shall not kill, which reaches past murder to the contempt, the cruelty, and the neglect that assault a neighbor's life and dignity. You shall not commit adultery, the call to sexual integrity, to faithfulness in marriage and purity outside it, in an age that treats the body as a toy and fidelity as quaint. You shall not steal, which the modern conscience must extend to the dishonest deal, the cut corner, the cheated employer and the cheated customer, every form of taking what is not justly yours. You shall not bear false witness, the command to truthfulness, which now must govern a man's words online as much as in the courtroom, the reputation he spares or destroys with a message, the honesty of what he posts and forwards and claims. And you shall not covet, the two commandments that reach into the heart itself, forbidding not merely the theft and the adultery but the greedy and lustful desire that is their seed. Kept together, these seven are the portrait of a man others can trust with their lives, their property, their marriages, and their good name.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart… and your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. — Matthew 22:37-40

A man might ask why, if love is the whole of it, we need the ten specific commandments at all; why not simply tell a man to love and leave the rest to him. The answer is that love without definite shape is exactly what the sentimental age has, and it has proven able to justify nearly anything. People do appalling things in the name of love, precisely because they have detached the word from any fixed content and made it mean whatever they wish. The commandments are love's guardrails against its own counterfeits. They tell a man that if what he calls love is leading him to betray his wife, or deceive his neighbor, or dishonor his parents, then whatever it is, it is not the love God commands. The ten words keep love honest, anchoring a word the world has made infinitely elastic to ten things a man may not do to anyone he claims to love.

The Law Fulfilled in Love

And here is where the whole law finally opens up, lest a man reduce it to a checklist he grimly ticks off. Jesus gathered all ten words into two: love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. The commandments are not an arbitrary ten; they are the concrete spelling-out of what love actually requires, because love is not a vague sentiment but has a shape, and the commandments are its shape. You cannot claim to love God while serving idols and profaning his name, or to love your neighbor while killing, betraying, robbing, and slandering him. The commandments tell a man what love looks like when it is real, in the places where sentiment is cheap and action is costly. And they were kept perfectly only once, by Christ, who is the law made flesh, so that the goal is not merely to obey the ten words from outside but to be so transformed by his grace that they become the natural expression of a heart that has learned to love as he loves.

CHAPTER SIX

When You Are Not Sure

The Certain and the Doubtful Conscience

Even a well-formed conscience meets situations where a man genuinely does not know what is right. The question is complex, the authorities seem to conflict, the circumstances are tangled, and he must act. What then? The tradition has clear and practical wisdom here, and it saves a man both from the paralysis of endless doubt and from the recklessness of acting blindly.

Follow a Certain Conscience

The first principle is firm: a man must always follow his certain conscience. When, after honest formation, he judges clearly that something is wrong, he may never do it, even if others pressure him, even if it costs him dearly, even if a superior commands it. To act against his own certain moral judgment is always sin, because it is the choice to do what he believes to be evil, and a man who trains himself to override his certain conscience is dismantling the very instrument by which he knows good from evil. This is the real and serious core of the dignity of conscience the Church defends: not that a man may do whatever he feels, but that he must never violate his settled judgment of the truth.

This principle has made saints and martyrs, and it is worth a man seeing the steel in it. It means that there is a point past which no authority on earth may command him, a sanctuary in him where only God and the truth may rule, and where even a king or a crowd or his own career must be told no. The martyrs died rather than act against their certain consciences; ordinary men keep their integrity by the same principle in smaller matters every day, refusing the profitable lie, the expected compromise, the thing everyone is doing that they know in conscience they must not do. A man who has formed his conscience and will follow it even at great cost is finally a free man, perhaps the only truly free kind, because he cannot be made to betray himself. The tyrant and the mob have no final power over such a man, because the one thing they want, his consent to do evil, is the one thing he will not give.

Never Act on a Doubtful One

The harder case is the doubtful conscience, when a man genuinely does not know whether an act is permitted or sinful. Here the principle is equally clear and widely ignored: a man must not act while in real doubt about whether the act is gravely wrong. To do what might be a serious sin, while unsure, is already to show a will content to sin if it turns out that way, a readiness to offend God that is itself disordered. Paul says that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin, meaning that to act against or ahead of one's honest conviction is to act wrongly. So the rule is: resolve the doubt first. Do not plunge ahead on the convenient assumption that it is probably fine. Stop, and settle the question before you act.

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. — Romans 14:23

Resolving the Doubt, and the Two Broken Consciences

Resolving a doubt is not the same as waiting until one feels comfortable; it is actively seeking the truth, through the sources of formation, through study, through prayer, and above all through asking someone who actually knows. A great many moral doubts a man carries for years would be settled in ten minutes by an honest question to a good priest, and the reluctance to ask is often the suspicion that he already knows the answer and would rather not hear it confirmed. Two broken consciences lie in wait on either side of the honest path. The lax conscience resolves every doubt in its own favor, always finding a reason that what it wanted to do was permitted after all, until it feels nothing at anything. The scrupulous conscience resolves every doubt against itself, finding sin everywhere, trapped in anxiety, unable ever to be at peace. Both are deformities, and both are healed the same way, by surrendering the judgment to an honest and external standard rather than to one's own feelings, and often by the simple obedience of trusting a wise confessor over one's own agitated or self-serving heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Man the Culture Cannot Bully

A Formed Conscience in a Confused Age

Stand back and look at the man this station builds, because he is exactly what the Mission requires and exactly what the age cannot produce. He is a man with a formed conscience, and in a culture drowning in moral confusion, such a man is a kind of miracle: unshakable without being arrogant, clear without being cruel, able to hold his ground in a storm that sweeps everyone else along.

Neither Arrogant nor Cowardly

The confused age pushes a man toward one of two failures, and the formed conscience saves him from both. The first failure is capitulation, the cowardice of the man who has no firm convictions and so simply absorbs whatever the culture currently believes, bending with each new pressure because he has nothing solid inside to resist it. The second failure is arrogance, the harshness of the man who has convictions but holds them as weapons, contemptuous of those who disagree, more interested in winning than in the other's good. The man of formed conscience avoids both. He is not blown about, because his conscience is anchored in a truth he did not invent and cannot be argued out of by fashion. And he is not arrogant, because he knows his certainties were received as gifts and not achieved by his own cleverness, and because the same formation that gave him

the truth gave him charity. He holds the truth firmly and offers it gently, which is the rarest combination in public life.

He Has Answers

What makes such a man formidable is simply that he has answers, real ones, when almost no one else does. When the hard questions come, from a skeptical colleague, from his own children, from the confusion of a friend whose life is unraveling, he is not reduced to feelings and slogans. He can say what is true and why it is true, tracing it to the nature of the human person and the wisdom of God rather than to mere personal preference. In a world where most people, pressed on any moral question, can finally say only that it feels right to them, the man who can actually give reasons stands out like a lighthouse. He does not need to shout. The steadiness itself is the witness, and it draws the lost the way solid ground draws a drowning man.

And his own children are the first to need it. A father with an unformed conscience hands his children nothing to stand on, and sends them out into the most morally confused culture in generations with no compass but their feelings, which that culture is expert at manipulating. A father with a formed conscience hands them something solid, not a list of rules enforced by his authority, which will not survive his absence, but reasons, a way of seeing why the good is good, that they can carry into rooms he will never enter. This is among the most important things a man will ever do, and it cannot be delegated to a parish program or a school. It is handed down, mostly, by a father who knows what he believes and why, and who lives it where his children can see. A man forms his own conscience in part so that he can help form theirs.

So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves… Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him. — Ephesians 4:14-15

The Bridge to Mission

This is the hinge into everything the final program will ask. The Mission of the Apostles will send a man out to engage precisely this confused and hurting culture, not to condemn it but to offer it the truth it has lost and secretly aches for. He cannot do that with a conscience as unformed as the culture's own. But a man whose conscience has been built on the Word of God, the teaching of the Church, the natural law, and the counsel of the wise, who knows how to act in certainty and how to resolve his doubts, who holds the truth in charity, is ready. He can walk into the moral chaos of his time and be, for the people caught in it, a point of stability, a man who knows where north is. That is the apostle the next station begins to send. First, though, the sacraments that will feed him for the sending, and then the Last Things that give the whole journey its urgency.

CONCLUSION

Form It, Then Follow It

The age gave you a slogan: follow your heart. You can see now how little it offers a man who has to live a real and complicated life, and how much it conceals. For the heart, left to itself, is exactly the thing that most needs forming, a faculty easily deceived, pulled by appetite, and flattered by a culture that profits from his confusion. To follow such a heart blindly is not freedom. It is to be led by whatever happens to be strongest in you at the moment, which is the oldest slavery there is.

The Church offers something harder and infinitely better. Your conscience is real and sacred, the sanctuary where you meet God, and you must indeed follow it. But first you must form it, over a lifetime, on the Word of God, the teaching of the Church, the law written into your own nature, and the counsel of the wise, correcting it patiently against the truth you did not invent and cannot change. A conscience formed this way becomes something the culture can never give a man and can never take from him: a reliable interior guide, true as a compass, by which he can walk through any confusion and not lose his way.

Form it, then follow it. That is the whole of it, and it produces the man the world is starving for, steady, clear, unbullied, and kind, who knows the good and does it and can say why. You have been given the moral life; next you will be given the sacraments that empower it to be lived, and then set before the Last Things that make every choice matter forever. The hearth is nearly complete. Soon, the sending.

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