

# CHRIST MEDICUS

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## ABOUT CMF

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*The Christ Medicus Foundation is a 501(c)(3) Catholic nonprofit organization that defends religious freedom and builds Christ-centered Catholic health care. Our mission is to share Jesus Christ's healing love in health care, to build authentically Catholic care, to defend life and religious freedom, and to protect the poor and vulnerable. We work for a person-centered health care system.*

*For over 20 years CMF has educated religious and lay leaders on the intersection of healthcare, the exercise of faith and religious freedom, and the defense of the right to life. CMF has launched coalitions, campaigns and conferences to educate and form Catholic laity to make Christ-centered healthcare decisions.*

# PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND CONSCIENCE VIOLATIONS IN THE MEDICAL FIELD

BY MARIAH BUZZA



“I will do no harm...” This is a standard that every medical doctor licensed in the United States swears to uphold. Medicine should always be proposed for the cultivation of life rather than its destruction.

Most medical professionals are genuinely striving to help others by providing medical and mental care. Their genuine care for the good of the other should not be undervalued or minimized. However, there are some situations in which some professionals are violating the standard to do no harm, whether it be their intention or not. One such situation, that is not as obvious or discussed as much as something like abortion, is the harm that is being done when a physician plans a course of treatment that does not respect their patient’s conscience. Such a violation of conscience undermines mental and ultimately physical health.

Unfortunately, this type of conscience violation is happening daily as pro-life women seek authentic care, but are coerced into accepting services contrary to their consciences at the risk of ridicule or less than adequate health care. Pro-Life medical professionals are avoiding women’s health because of a lack of protection of their conscience rights as professionals. This perpetuates the problem, leaving more and more women vulnerable to a culture of physicians who do not understand the needs of pro-life women (Deffner, 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

When the word “conscience” is said, perhaps the image of a small angel and devil atop the shoulders of a cartoon character comes to mind. Today’s culture has come to view a person’s conscience as something like the war between good and evil within the human person that determines the person’s behavior. It is depicted as something that is deeply personal and not necessarily universal. This lack of universality has led to many different understandings of what is meant by conscience and questions as to whether or not human beings actually have the capacity for authentic moral decision making.

The Catholic-Christian understanding of conscience rejects this subjective viewpoint and provides a unified framework of conscience. This understanding is supported by psychological findings that conscience does exist and is deeply intertwined with one’s mental well-being.

Section 1178 (1993a) of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

*“Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law...”<sup>2</sup>*



The Catholic understanding of conscience recognizes that conscience is ultimately rooted in divine law within every human person. It is the obligation of every Catholic-Christian

<sup>1</sup>‘Conscience in Residency’ Project Supports Pro-Life Doctors in Training. National Catholic Register, <https://www.ncregister.com/features/conscience-in-residency-project-supports-pro-life-doctors-in-training>.

<sup>2</sup>Catechism of the Catholic Church. (1993a). [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a6.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a6.htm).

<sup>3</sup>Catechism of the Catholic Church. (1993b). [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a6.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a6.htm).

<sup>4,5</sup>Sanrock, J. W. (2021). Life-span development (18th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>6,7</sup>Yu, H., Hu, J., Hu, L., & Zhou, X. (2014). The voice of conscience: neural bases of interpersonal guilt and compensation. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 9(8), 1150–8. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nst090>.

<sup>8</sup>Anisman, H. (2015). *Stress and your health : from vulnerability to resilience* (Ser. Online access with dda: askews (psychology)). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.divinemercy.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdfdirect/10.1002/9781118850350.ch7>.

person to form one's conscience in this law. The Church provides guidance on how to know if an action is in accord with the divine law. In section 1789 (1993b) of the Catechism the Church asserts three rules which always apply in moral decision making:

*“Some rules apply in every case:*

- 1. One may never do evil so that good may result from it;*
- 2. The Golden Rule: “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.”*
- 3. Charity always proceeds by way of respect for one's neighbor and his conscience: “Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience...you sin against Christ.” Therefore “it is right not to...do anything that makes your brother stumble.”<sup>3</sup>*

If a human person follows their conscience with these three rules in mind, (and hopefully the entire divine law), for a particular moral issue, all should reach the same conclusion. This illustrates that there is a universal element embedded into the conscience of every individual due to conscience's roots in the divine law.

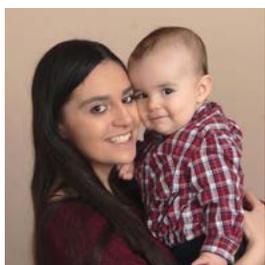
The relationship between conscience and moral development is a well-studied topic in the mental health professions. Even in Freudian thought, which at least partially views human behavior as a product of pure instinct and environmental factors, the superego serves as a guiding moral framework embedded in a human person's personality (Santrock, 2021, p. 238)<sup>4</sup>. However, Freud thought that familial and societal connections influenced the formation of the superego, rather than describing it as an innate sense of goodness inscribed on the heart of every human being by virtue of being created by God. He reduced the innate nature of conscience to the ability that every human person has to receive information and be formed by that information. Many other theorists in the field take a similar approach, viewing conscience as a subjective interaction between morality, emotions, and behavior (Kochanska & others, 2010, as cited in Santrock, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. This approach is that aside from sociocultural expectations, there is no ultimate good or truth that a person should strive to reflect in their moral behavior.

Regardless of the universality of conscience and morality, psychology identifies that when a person violates their own conscience, a person's mental and physiological health is harmed.



In a 2014 Chinese study (Yu et al., 2014)<sup>6</sup>, researchers found that interpersonal guilt, an emotion evoked when doing wrong to another (Wager et al., 2009a, as cited in Yu et al., 2014)<sup>7</sup>, elicited a stress response comparable to social threat and anxiety in a human person's neural processing system. Stress responses like this are related to decreased or detrimental physiological functioning within the human person. It has even been found that the inflammatory responses initiated by a stressful experience have negative impacts on a person's immunological responses and thus make a person more susceptible to a great deal of diseases (Anisman, 2015)<sup>8</sup>. The conscience of a human person actually depicts the interplay between the mental and physical components of a human person. Within this interplay it is seen that forcing a person to violate their conscience, regardless if the person is religious, is harmful to a person's mental health, and leads to harm to a person's physical health.

If physicians and medical professionals are to truly “do no harm,” they must respect a person's conscience. ♦



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# THE SPIRIT OF CATHOLIC HEALTHCARE

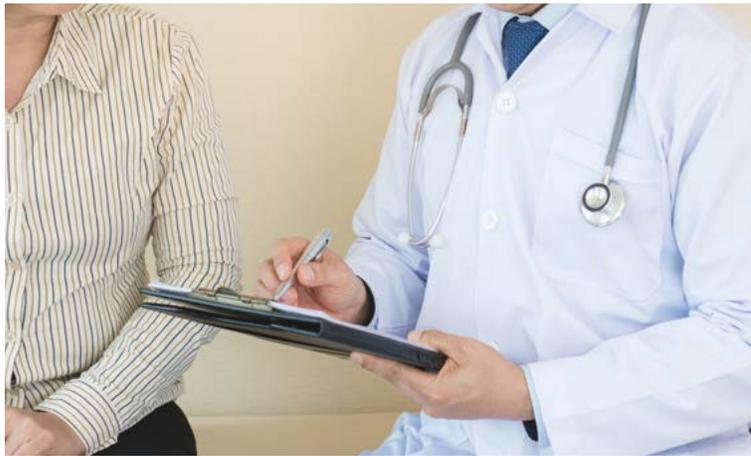
FR. JAMES BROMWICH RN, M.DIV., STL



Healthcare and healthcare professionals have come into focus this past year in dramatic fashion. As a result of COVID-19, healthcare professionals and the capacity of our healthcare system have been thrust into the public's view. COVID-19 is also accelerating changes in healthcare, a lesser-known phenomenon. This is a good time to reflect a bit more on the essential role of Catholic healthcare in the work of the Church.

Speaking to healthcare professionals and volunteers, Pope Benedict XVI reflected upon their mission in relation to living the Gospel in caring for the sick. His teaching is found in the Proceedings of the XXVII International Conference for Healthcare Workers, *The Hospital, Setting for Evangelisation: a Human and Spiritual Mission*, November 15-17, 2012.

*"...the Church also reassures health-care professionals and volunteers. Yours is a special vocation that requires study, sensitivity and experience. Nevertheless, a further skill which goes beyond academic qualifications is demanded of those who choose to work in the world of suffering, living their work as a 'human and spiritual mission.'"*<sup>1</sup>



All who work with the sick participate in a "special vocation," living their work as a "human and spiritual mission." This is the first and most important statement that needs to be made concerning the spirit of Catholic healthcare. We are in a field of work caring for vulnerable persons. We are working in a vineyard where, according to Jesus himself, we care for Him in the persons of the sick. It is possible to live healthcare as a mission, rather than merely performing a job, if we know why. What is this mission?

*"...hospitals assume a privileged position in evangelizing, because wherever the Church is the "bearer of the presence of God" it becomes at the same time "the instrument of the true humanization of man and the world" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization, n. 9)."*<sup>2</sup>

This statement is packed with meaning! When we are among the sick, we are in the presence of God. This is evident in the story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel (Luke 10-25-37), as well as Jesus intimately identifying himself with the "least of these" in the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46). Moreover, we are in the presence of the mystery of suffering. Jesus, rather than eliminating all suffering, took suffering upon himself, thus impregnating it with great meaning and value.

The very meaning of being human is contained in caring for the sick, in the presence of suffering, which Jesus owned, and in the very presence of God in the sick. Evangelization could be described as directing the gaze of human persons toward the love of God. The presence of the sick and the act of caring for them can accomplish this if we imbue our care with the spirit of the Gospel.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.humandevlopment.va/content/dam/sviluppoumano/pubblicazioni-documenti/archivio/salute/dolentium-hominum-en-1-72/DH-81-eng.pdf>, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, p. 11, accessed Feb. 3, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

Helping people understand what it means to be a human being is the key that unlocks the new evangelization and can help lessen violence and bring peace to communities, families and hearts. So many people do not know their own dignity as humans, nor do they fully understand or acknowledge the dignity of others. In the face of suffering, dying and death, the hospital becomes a privileged place to explore the meaning of being human and the meaning and dignity of suffering.

*“The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer” (Spe Salvi, n. 38). This ‘going beyond’ the clinical approach opens you to the dimension of transcendence, for which the chaplains and religious assistants play a fundamental role. It is their primary task to make the glory of the Crucified Risen One shine out in the rich panorama of health care and in the mystery of suffering.”<sup>3</sup>*



This transcendence is what we all share, including when it is shrouded in the mystery of suffering. Suffering is something we all hold in common. No one escapes suffering. With only a small amount of discernment we can see how suffering has been redeemed in Christ and serves an important purpose in allowing us to serve one another and grow in goodness as we grow in learning the art of love (self-gift). Transcendence is seeing beyond our material existence, or rather, seeing our material existences united with our transcendent existence. It is precisely here where we can begin to connect with the true meaning of being human. Whether we are rich or poor, male or female, healthy or sick, whatever race, nationality, creed and so on, we all share a common humanity that can first be understood through human reason and finds its beginning and end in God. Do we not all want to love and be loved? We all seek goodness, beauty, truth and unity (community). We all suffer. It is part of being human, as is the desire to relieve suffering.

The spirit of Catholic healthcare is to evangelize. To some, no doubt, these words grate. To me, they are music. To evangelize means to help people see and unite with the full meaning of being human, of being alive. With this comes peace. How else can we possibly bring true comfort to the sick? Anything that does not help the suffering connect with what it means to be human, including how their suffering has been redeemed, is a missed opportunity. We are Catholics. Our mission is to show how all of creation, including each of us, has been redeemed in Christ.

Let's end with the final words of Pope Benedict XVI from his address, in which he speaks to the sick:

*“You ‘are the brothers of the suffering Christ, and with him, if you wish, you are saving the world!’*

*(Second Vatican Council, Message to the Poor, the Sick and the Suffering, 8 December 1965).<sup>24</sup> ♦*



**Father James Bromwich RN, M.Div., STL** has been ordained a priest for nearly 18 years. He has served as a pastor, hospital chaplain, adjunct professor of medical ethics, and currently works as a mission director in Catholic healthcare. Before ordination to the priesthood, Fr. James worked as a bone marrow transplant and oncology nurse.

# MORAL CONSCIENCE TODAY

BY DR. JOSEPH MEANEY, PHD.



The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) issued a document<sup>1</sup> to help people discern in conscience what to do about the dilemma many face today of taking the ethically problematic vaccines currently available for COVID-19 or not. This is just one more example of the great importance for all Catholics and persons of good will to have a proper understanding of conscience and a well-formed conscience.



The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives this definition of moral conscience at number 1778:

*“Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.”*

Later on, at numbers 1783-84, it says;

*“Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. The education of the conscience is a lifelong task.”*

The most important points to keep in mind for a modern reader I think are the insistence that conscience is not

a feeling but rather a judgment of objective reason and that forming our consciences is an ongoing responsibility for everyone. It is I think very obvious to parents that the most basic education they give their children is moral. Our parents and other teachers show us what is good or evil and urge us to pursue what is right and avoid what is wrong. Our moral compasses do need updating, however, as we grow older and face more complex situations.

If we cannot distinguish clearly between what is right or wrong and do not possess the inner strength to pursue what is right, we can expect serious trouble to follow. The worst possibility is our own eternal separation from God in hell or our leading others into this calamity.

The incredible opportunity for all of us is holiness based on a well-formed conscience that guides us to eternal reward in heaven. This path is not easy to follow, but we all know intuitively that the most worthwhile goals always require effort and sacrifice. In some cases, saints have had to choose martyrdom because they discerned in conscience that they could not do what their persecutors required. Christ spoke clearly in the Gospels about not fearing those who can kill the body but not harm our souls (St. Matthew 10:28). Rather, he warned us of those who are skilled at leading people into sin and putting their eternal destiny in peril.

It is essential that none of us become complacent and think that we have everything figured out and, thus, no need for further formation of conscience. Just as we can never know everything about God, it is necessary to keep learning about truth, beauty, and goodness until our last breath.

An unfortunate necessity in our confused times is to remind others about what conscience is not. Conscience is not a feeling,



**Dr. Joseph Meaney, PhD.** became president of the NCBC in 2019. He received his PhD in bioethics from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome; his dissertation topic was *Conscience and Health Care: A Bioethical Analysis*. Dr. Meaney earned his master's in Latin American studies, focusing on health care in Guatemala, from the University of Texas at Austin. His bachelor's degree was in history from the University of Dallas. Dr. Meaney was director of international outreach and expansion for Human Life International (HLI) and is a leading expert on the international pro-life and family movement. He founded the Rome office of HLI in 1998 and lived in Rome for nine years, where he collaborated closely with dicasteries of the Holy See, particularly the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Pontifical Academy for Life.



Most of all, it is not totally subjective and separate from objective truth. Moral intuitions do exist and can be very helpful, but we must use our ability to think reasonably when making a judgment of conscience and discerning what is the right decision or action. We should be able to produce well-grounded reasons for our decisions in conscience and not appeal simply to our feelings.

The Church, through her teaching authority, helps us to see what is good or evil. It is wonderful that so much assistance is available in forming our consciences. Good parenting is the most solid foundation for a well-formed conscience. Parents are assisted by the Catechism and magisterial teachings of the Church and by priests and spiritual authorities. Good teachers, family members, and even friends have their part to play as well.

I have a great deal of empathy for those who lack this support. God can work miracles, and He has to do so for individuals deprived of good parents, the guidance of the Church, or other positive influences to help their growth in virtue and their ability to make the right conscientious discernments.

On a very practical level, helping Catholics and persons of good will to discern what is ethical or not is the core mission of The National Catholic Bioethics Center. We exist to provide expert assistance because some biomedical problems are especially thorny and hard to resolve and frequently involve questions of life and death. Our ethicists are constantly learning and putting their knowledge and prayers at the service of those wracked by doubt and fear because of some terrible dilemma or heartbreaking situation where they have to make hard decisions.



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<sup>1</sup> Points to Consider on the Use of COVID-19 Vaccines, National Catholic Bioethics Center, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3ada1a6a2e8d6a131d1dcd/t/5fd3ce39e679895094dd1e49/1607716409962/NCBCVaccineStatementFINAL.pdf>.

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