

Statement for Website
From Fr. Michael Basque

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Some time ago, a young man approached me with a problem. His fiancée's parents had invited him over to their house for a steak dinner on Friday. As a Catholic he had always tried to observe the Church's rule about not eating meat on Friday. Since his fiancée's parents were not Catholic they did not know about the Church's rule. "They know I enjoy steak and so I can't go there and just eat salad", he said. "Yet I feel strongly about not eating meat on Friday. Is it wrong for me to eat the steak under these circumstances?" I told him to consider what the Church's rule is trying to do and then decide whether it applies to this situation. "That is why God gave you a conscience", I added. "Conscience", he replied, "I thought that was what made you feel bad if you did something wrong".

In today's Gospel, Jesus is confronted by some Pharisees about whether Jews could pay taxes to the Emperor. The tax had to be paid with a Roman coin which had the Emperor's image on it. Since the Emperor considered himself a god, Jews who used the coin to pay the tax would become unclean by doing so. The act of paying the tax would also signify collaborating with an unjust pagan occupier. Yet, not paying the tax would invite a violent response from the Romans. The Pharisees were certain they had trapped Jesus in a moral dilemma with no way out. After he revealed their hypocrisy by asking for the coin and they provided it, Jesus made the distinction between those things which are owed to Caesar and those owed to God. However, how does one make that decision? When God gave humans a free will they became able to choose right from wrong. When God gave humans the ability to reason, they became able to know right and wrong by applying divine law to every situation in life, even the complicated ones.

Catholics and other people of faith are called to live by a moral code which is articulated through divine commandments, laws and norms. Since it is impossible for any set of regulations to cover all situations, the interpretation and application of these rules is a complex undertaking. In addition, since the moral code of believers differentiates them from non-believers living by it may cause tensions within a pluralistic society. Finally, as the complexity of many dimensions of life grows new moral dilemmas appear. For religious people, it is becoming more difficult to live up to the moral standards they profess.

During this Covid-19 pandemic, there are a number of complex questions which must be answered by our society. How do you balance off the need to protect the health of the population with the need to re-start the economy? If a vaccine is developed how far can the government go in requiring people to receive it? How do you determine who gets scarce resources like personal protective equipment or doses of a future vaccine? All human beings have the capacity to discern what is right and wrong through their reason as well as apply rules to specific situations. People of faith, with their established moral codes and experience in grappling with the complexities of trying to live by them, could provide others with insights into dealing with such questions.

Conscience, the ability to apply a moral code to specific situations, is the tool God gave us to live in a complex world. Using it shows we appreciate the gift.