

What would you do if you received a stern warning to never speak about Jesus again? This is the predicament that Peter and John face when they are brought before the Sanhedrin for helping a crippled man to walk and telling everyone about the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter had denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed on Good Friday. He felt shame and remorse. In failure, he acknowledged his own weakness and turned to God for help. God forgave the contrite apostle and helped him with the spiritual gifts to be more courageous. That new and courageous heart is on display as the Sanhedrin try to intimidate him into silence.

Rather than cave into the unjust demand, Peter and John reply, "Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19).

It is not easy to stand up for our faith in face of opposition, but God wants to help us do the right thing. God gives us a conscience to help us choose right from wrong. "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths" (Gaudium et Spes 16).

In Peter and John, we have a positive example of listening to conscience and acting accordingly. The same cannot be said for the Sanhedrin. They conspire to suppress the truth. "What are we to do with these men? Everyone living in Jerusalem knows that a remarkable sign was done through them, and we cannot deny it. But so that it may not be spread any further among the people, let us give them a stern warning never again to speak to anyone in this name" (4:16-17). They follow up the stern warning with an even harsher threat.

"When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking" (CCC 1777). The imprudent man turns a deaf ear to God. This often happens in a group. No one wants to go against the harmony of the group and stand up for the truth. As irrational as it is, the pressure of the group discourages anyone from voicing a dissenting opinion and calling for a more upright response.

The Sanhedrin would have preferred to inflict a severe punishment on Peter and John, but they recognize the limits placed on them by public opinion. It is almost a certain guarantee that the apostles will be in hot water before too long. We recall that when Jesus called the Pharisees and scribes to task, they plotted to do him in. The Apostles will continue to follow their consciences and the Sanhedrin will continue to look for ways to silence and punish them.

We must be on guard against our own failure of conscience. We need to recognize the danger of giving in to group pressure when we know what should do. We also need to have quiet time to focus and reflect and discern what the gentle voice of God is calling us to.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us "The education of the conscience is a lifelong task... Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart" (CCC 1784).

A good starting place is to practice the Golden Rule. Treat others as you want them to treat you. It is also helpful to make wise choices in what we read and study. God can enlighten us as we read and reflect on sacred scripture.

"Open the gates of righteousness; I will enter and thank the LORD.

This is the LORD's own gate, through it the righteous enter.

I thank you for you answered me; you have been my savior" (Ps 118:19-21).