

Following one's *conscience* when facing immorality

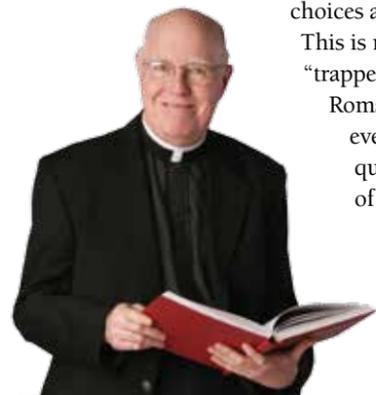


Dear Father Kerper: I feel trapped. The government forces me to do lots of things against my conscience. My tax money, for example, pays for things I regard as immoral. And many large corporations, whose products I need and buy, favor abortion and “family planning.” How can I operate in our society without sharing in evil? It seems impossible.

Thank for your very timely comments and question. I commend you for thinking carefully about the moral aspects of your choices, many of which may entwine you with evil. In today's world, everything becomes interconnected and some evil things remain deeply hidden, even within “mainstream” corporations and organizations.

Like you, many good people feel “trapped” when they make choices about political candidates, products and obeying laws. This is not new. From earliest times, Christians have felt “trapped.” They had to deal with matters like serving in the Roman army, paying taxes to anti-Christian states, and even tolerating slavery. Indeed, the Lord himself faced questions about taxation, marriage and the authority of unjust political figures. Through all this, one principle remained preeminent: *Christians never can act against conscience.* But what about the “traps,” choices that seem to settle for a mix of moral good and evil?

Through the centuries, Catholic theologians developed a useful tool called “The Canons of Cooperation.” These “canons” — laws — help faithful Christians to navigate through the murky



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mixture of good and evil that they face everyday. Here's what they do.

First, the “canons” carefully distinguish between two ways of cooperating with evil. “*Formal cooperation*” happens when people freely join their wills to the evil deed. “*Material cooperation*” refers to deeds or things that advance an evil deed *without consenting to it.*

Now let's put this distinction into action.

Taxes fund at least some immoral activity, thereby making every citizen a *material cooperators* in evil. But many have not freely consented to the evil. In fact, some may even object to bad laws and practices. As such, they have no direct responsibility for the evil done. Moreover, the same taxes support good things such as education, aid to the poor, law enforcement and health care. This principle applies to our entanglement with corporations whose products we purchase. In our complex technological society, we simply can't avoid at least some material cooperation with evil.

The “canons” make a second key distinction: the difference between *necessary* and *unnecessary cooperation.* If our participation is small, not essential and not desired, then our culpability diminishes.

Even though the “Canons of Cooperation” can guide us through much painful decision making, they do not free us from *absolute moral norms,* which the Church steadfastly upholds. These norms prohibit killing the innocent, lying under oath, exploiting the poor, desecrating the Blessed Sacrament and so on.

What happens when state authority or some other force *compels people* to violate their conscience? Here people must respond through *conscientious objection* and even *civil disobedience.*

Conscientious objection happens when someone sincerely discerns that obeying a specific law will violate his or her conscience. In such a case, the person must seek *an exemption* from the law.

Many nations now have laws that protect the right of conscientious objectors, notably by exempting them from mandatory military service and other activities that seriously conflict with their religious beliefs. The Catholic Church strongly supports the legal recognition of conscientious objection.

These laws generally require “alternative service,” such as acting as a medic, teaching in a poor community, working in a hospital and so on. Here the state acknowledges the rights of individual conscience while also affirming the state's authority to promote the common good through other forms of mandatory public service.

What happens when the state doesn't permit conscientious objection or applies it only to military service? This raises the stakes to *civil disobedience* — the *actual violation* of existing laws considered immoral. Here individual conscience collides head on with state power.

The just practice of civil disobedience requires three conditions.

First, the violated law must be truly and seriously unjust.

Second, those who violate the law must willingly accept any reasonable penalty imposed for the violation.

Third, resistance against the unjust law must always be nonviolent.

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement in the United States practiced the classical form of civil disobedience.

First, the movement violated state and local laws that strictly required the separation of black people from others. These laws regulated seating on buses, at lunch counters and even within churches; they also established separate “white” and “colored” hotels, schools and so forth. In the eyes of some people, these laws seemed reasonable and not really burdensome. However, these laws loudly proclaimed the supposed inferiority of black people and gravely violated the proposition that all human beings are equal and deserve equal treatment.

Second, those who violated racial segregation laws accepted arrest, endured beatings, paid fines and occasionally spent time in jail.

Third, most civil rights leaders, especially Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., always espoused non-violence. This was not merely tactical, but motivated primarily by Christian faith, namely confronting evil with love.

In using the “Canons of Cooperation” and these other modes of *conscientious action,* we need prayerful discernment, lots of reliable information, prudence and patience. Though we may still feel “trapped” and perhaps troubled that not everyone agrees with our decisions, we can confidently hope that the Lord will bless our sincere efforts to hear his voice that echoes within our conscience. ■

For a concise statement of the Moral and Canonical Principles of Cooperation, please see *Medicine And Christian Morality* by Thomas J. O'Connell, S.J. (New York: Alba House, 1975), pp. 31-38 and pp. 148-152.

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The Benedictine monks of Saint Anselm Abbey in Manchester, NH celebrated the profession and ordination jubilees of four of their confreres on July 11, 2020, the Feast of Saint Benedict. From left to right: Father Jerome Day, O.S.B., Abbot Mark Cooper, O.S.B., and Father John Fortin, O.S.B.