



science in public life is the reasoning behind *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the 1992 U.S. Supreme Court decision reaffirming a woman's constitutional right to choose to have an abortion. According to the plurality opinion, one of the reasons for upholding this right was that "the abortion decision may originate within the zone of conscience and belief ... The destiny of the woman must be shaped to a large extent on her own conception of her spiritual imperatives and her place in society."

As Justice Stevens explained in a separate opinion, "a woman who has, in the privacy of her thoughts and conscience, weighed the options and made her decision cannot be forced to reconsider all, simply because the State believes she has come to the wrong conclusion."

Public disagreements about questions of conscience are also invoked as reasons for keeping religious principles in a "private" sphere, walled off from conversations about politics and public policy. During the election of 1960, for example, then Senator John F. Kennedy responded to suspicions about how a Catholic president might face a crisis of conscience between allegiance to his country and allegiance to religious authority by assuring citizens: "I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair ... I do not speak for my church on public matters—and the church does not speak for me."

In his unsuccessful run for president in 2004, Senator John Kerry also drew

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## Is Conscience King?

# As long as the conversation

Helping the political order open up to broader and more humane horizons

BY AMY UELMEN

**“C**ONSCIENCE IS INVIO-  
lable, and no one is to be  
forced to act in a manner  
contrary to conscience,”  
explains a 1971 Vatican document. But  
what does this mean for political life and  
political choices?

In our society today the inviolability of conscience is frequently invoked, taking complete priority over religious teachings and guidance. In politics you often hear that no one should impose their "personal morality" on others, since doing so would interfere with decisions that others have made according to their own conscience.

One example of this vision of con-

a sharp distinction between his personal beliefs and his role as a public official. As he described in one interview, on one hand he opposed abortion: "I believe life does begin at conception." But on the other hand, "I can't take my Catholic belief, my article of faith, and legislate it on a Protestant or a Jew or an atheist ... We have separation of church and state in the United States of America."

What is wrong with this picture? One of the problems at the root of the argument that an unborn fetus should not be





accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.”


What are our duties when the political order is out of harmony with moral law? Writing from a prison cell after protesting segregation laws, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* offers an eloquent example of conscience as a witness to the profound link between the society’s laws and the moral law. “How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust?” King wrote. “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”

King went on to set forth criteria for protesting against segregation laws: “One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.”

St. Thomas More, the patron saint of statesmen, is perhaps the example par excellence of a readiness to pay the price for witnessing to the convictions of conscience, the result of a life-long conversation with God. When King Henry VIII manipulated his power to assume control over the Church of England, More resigned from his post as chancellor and was eventually imprisoned and executed

for refusing to sign an oath that recognized the king’s supremacy in spiritual affairs.

More’s last words are often quoted as a deep and even defiant tension between political life and conscience: “I die the King’s good servant, *but* God’s first.” However, careful scholarship reveals that the actual words were “*and* God’s first.” Perhaps the “and,” more than the “but,” captures the thrust of More’s life, in which his conversation with God, in the depths of his conscience, informed his service to humanity through politics.

Heroes such as Martin Luther King and Thomas More help us to see that conversations with God in the intimacy of one’s conscience are not only a guide for individual decisions and choices but a gift for the political community as a whole. Both were able to bring the light of faith and—in the words of Pope Benedict—their own “encounter with the living God” into a world suffering from “ethical blindness.” Doing so, they challenged the political order to open up to broader and more humane horizons. Both continue to shine as beacons of light and hope for the struggles of our political order today. 

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Cardinal Ratzinger’s essay, “Conscience and Truth,” is included in the volume *Crisis of Conscience*, edited by John M. Haas (1996). A *Thomas More Source Book*, edited by Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith (2004), is an excellent collection of Thomas More’s writings.

## The International Workshop

Developments and success stories for the Movement for Unity in Politics

**M**ORE THAN 10 YEARS AGO IN NAPLES, Italy, politicians of various parties, ordinary citizens and government officials presented their questions to Focolare founder Chiara Lubich. One particularly concerned them.

“Is it possible to have a method of politics that is inspired by such great values as peace, justice, respect for the life of every person in any condition?” they asked.

She responded with a challenge: “It is possible, but with two conditions. First, the great values of humanity—peace, justice, love for each individual and the community—must be placed before personal and legitimate party diversities, and

## Department of Noise Protection

A Hungarian engineer contributes to collective environmental awareness in his country’s Ministry of the Environment

**P**ART OF MY JOB AT THE DEPARTMENT OF Protection Against Noise and Vibrations at the Ministry of the Environment had to do with the paperwork connected to becoming a member of the European Union. In the first phase of the process for







