November 1968

Letters

Catholic Physicians' Guild

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Recommended Citation
Catholic Physicians' Guild (1968) "Letters," The Linacre Quarterly: Vol. 35 : No. 4 , Article 9.
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol35/iss4/9
The Honest Conscience

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Some will argue that as long as a person thinks that what he does is right he
should go ahead and do it. A person must act according to his conscience. This
statement is a dangerous half-truth. In an excessive anxiety to protect the claims
of the individual conscience, the claims of the human community and the claims
of the objective order of the universe are undermined. This cannot be done
without betraying the honesty of the very conscience which we wish to protect.
In the first place, it is together, in community, that we acquire knowledge at all.
One cannot think in complete independence from a tradition of wisdom. We must
think for ourselves but not by ourselves. In the second place, the honesty of one's
conscience is not the only consideration that is of importance. Commonness is
not a mercy than subjective goodness. In addition to the goodness or badness of my performance of the action, there is the question of the
goodness or badness of the act itself. If the act is objectively not good or harm and
evil may flow from it to myself and others, regardless of how

The person who faces a moral decision must therefore pause before two
considerations — that of the moral tradition in which he was raised, and that of
the objective order. By so doing he acts more fully in accord with his
humanity, which is to say, more honestly. For humanity is not confined to an
individual person. Humanity includes a 'being with others' and a 'being in a
world of cause and effect.' But since moral wisdom, even when well transmitted
by the community, does not become clear to everyone equally and at the same
time, and since the claims of the objective order become more inscrutable with
increasing complexity of life, we must all exist in greater or lesser tension between
individual conscience and community tradition, between subjective goodness and
objective correctness, between conscience and law, between seeing with our own
eyes and seeing through the eyes of others. It is in the face of this tension of the
moral life that every man at some time in his struggle to be true to his humanity
is led to suspect that more is needed than that we be 'together' and 'in a world.'
We must also be 'under God.' We cannot contain our wisdom long, unless Wisdom
contains us. This is the point at which honesty of individual conscience becomes
inseparable from the desire, however incomplete, to become a part of a People of
God.