I was both intrigued and pleased by feedback from my July 31 column, "Top 10 quotes from the Vatican's 'sensus fidei' document." It ranged from people wondering, "Why would you waste your time on this?" to others asking for more specifics about what to do when they are unable to accept certain church teachings. This is a crucial question for those who love the church but find their consciences bid them to, in the words of "'Sensus Fidei' in the Life of the Church," "deny assent" on teachings about birth control, women's roles and LGBT human rights, for example. The dilemma is: What to do? Surprisingly, the Vatican statement provided more encouragement for laity to engage in dialogue with each other and with church leaders than has been the case for a long time.

Too often, Catholics raised in our "pay, pray and obey" Catholic culture are unaware that it is not only our right, but sometimes our duty to speak about matters concerning the good of the church (Code of Canon Law 212.3). Most are surprised to learn the authentic teaching of the church is that whenever there is conflict between one's conscience and church teaching, one must always obey one's conscience. St. Thomas Aquinas says: "Anyone upon whom the ecclesiastical authority, in ignorance of the true facts, impose a demand that offends against his clear conscience, should perish in excommunication rather than violate his conscience."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. 'He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters.' " Of course, Catholic teaching also emphasizes that an individual's conscience does not exist in a vacuum: "Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and
truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator."

So if one finds one's educated and carefully formed conscience in conflict with a certain church teaching, how is one to act? There are some excellent criteria developed by U.S. Catholic bishops and theologians available as guides. In 1968, in response to widespread public rejection of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* that banned contraception, the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter "Human Life in Our Day" proposed three norms for theological dissent: "The expression of theological dissent from the magisterium is in order only if the reasons are serious and well-founded, if the manner of dissent does not question or impugn the teaching authority of the Church, and is such as not to give scandal."

Building on the bishops' norms, two prominent theologians, Fr. Richard McCormick and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, also published guidelines. McCormick's four criteria are implied in those developed by Johnson that I have reprinted below, so I won't list them separately here. Johnson's criteria were published in *Commonweal* on Jan. 26, 1996, after a Vatican office issued an opinion that church teaching on the nonordination of women might be infallible. Eighteen months later, the Catholic Theological Society of America found "serious doubts" about that opinion and called for continued widespread discussion of the issue. I won't revisit that discussion here; the following guidelines, as well as those from U.S. bishops, are helpful for any troubling conflict between conscience and church teaching.

Responsible dissent begins as an act of conscience and continues as part of a committed life in the Church. It is not habitual but arises in particular instances out of concern for the truth. It requires a certain discipline in order to be done well. The value guiding it in all cases should be the common good. Differing with institutional authorities in the church must always be for the church, for the present and future growth of the whole community in truth and love. With that controlling value in place, several discrete norms shape individual and corporate dissent.

Responsible dissent takes place in the context of a deep and abiding assent to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the church's tradition which interprets it.

At the outset, the presumption is in favor of the particular teaching. One should try through prayer and study with an open mind to appreciate the reasons for the present position. If, through this effort, serious and well-founded reasons for holding a contrary opinion persist so that it is impossible in integrity of mind and heart to agree, then one must disagree.

There should be self-criticism about motivation, testing whether dissent is driven by innate hostility or some other hidden agenda, rather than by sincere conviction of the truth.

Since public dissent can detract from certain community values, it must be weighed and decided that the good to be accomplished is in proportion to the possible harm that might result.

The manner of dissent should be respectful of the leadership office in the church, not impugning it although disagreeing in this instance.
Presentation of one's views should also respect the consciences of others in the community who disagree, and the situation of those who have not investigated or cannot investigate complex issues.

While clear in resistance, the voice of dissent should be inviting a dialogue, rather than competitive in a win-lose way. The overall purpose is to promote the truth in love by urging the teaching office of the church to deeper listening and reflection.

Over the years, informed, responsible disagreement has been a gift to the church whereby the criticism born of love has empowered growth.

As I write this, I am acutely aware that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious is meeting in Nashville, Tenn., where it will present its outstanding leadership award to Johnson. The Vatican's Cardinal Gerhard Müller harshly criticized the decision. Insofar as both LCWR and Johnson have "differed with institutional authorities" in a way that is clearly "for the church, for the present and future growth of the whole community in truth and love," we are greatly in their debt. They are showing the rest of us how to "promote the truth in love" with teaching offices in the church.

But it is nothing short of ironic that the recent sensus fidei document, issued with the approval of Müller himself, says: "Those who exercise authority in the church will take care to ensure that there is responsible exchange of freely held and expressed opinion among the People of God. More than this, they will set up norms and conditions for this to take place."

It seems to me that this is exactly what the LCWR assemblies have been doing for the past 40 years. The sisters' right to a venue in which "freely held and expressed opinions" can be exchanged is explicitly promoted by the latest teaching of the church.

Do you want to tell Cardinal Müller, or should I?

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

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