

My Great Uncle Joe Neudecker is the oldest priest in the diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota. He'll be 90 next month, retired, but still working at a parish. He is a devout priest and a wise man, renown for his love of children and sense of humor. We ask him what does he do now that he's retired. He says the same thing I did before I retired, but now with a clear conscience.

Most people experience this desire for a clear conscience, and it's a mark that something healthy is going on. People who act without regard for conscience are frightening characters: hardened criminals, people whose concern is only for themselves, for example. But if once in a while you come to a point where you say, "My conscience is bothering me," it means that one part of you can criticize another part of you, it means that one part of you is trying to listen to God.

Today's first reading tells the story of the call of Abram. In some ways, it's an incredible story to reflect on. Abram is the one you may recall with whom God first makes a covenant; God tells Abram that he will be the father of many children and they shall have property to call their own forever. God will be their God and Abram's family will be God's people. God struck this covenant with a man who was 75 years old and childless. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born; God waited 25 years before fulfilling his promise to a 75-year old man. Then years later, God asked Abraham to kill this son, as a test Abraham's faith. Abraham is no ordinary mortal. We learn this from the very beginning of the story which we hear today: When God called Abram into this covenant, the Bible says, "Abram went as the Lord directed him." He went as the Lord directed him. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people could say that about you after you die? She went as the Lord directed her. What Abram did so simply was to go through life with a clear conscience; he went through life with one part of him listening to God, and all of him responding to God.

Catholics are renown for having a conscience. How clear it is is another matter. But there is a part of us that listens to God. Typically, Catholics listen to God through the Church. For example, the Church tell us we're supposed to go to Mass on Sundays, abstain from meat on Fridays in Lent, and fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. If for some reason we don't, our conscience bothers us. So if typical Catholics want a clear conscience they obey the laws of the Church.

Now, there are times we find ourselves in opposition to the laws of the Church. Some months ago, the Vatican issued a document on Homosexuality, and this week it has released another on reproductive matters like in vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood. I'm quite certain that many Catholics are going to find themselves in opposition to official stands taken by the Church. I just would like to say this: The laws of the Church are given to us to help us act with an informed conscience. The Church serves the conscience more than conscience serves the Church. When the Vatican speaks it does so out of a high regard for human life and the value of the human person. All matters of conscience can be better informed with that kind of assistance. Only with an informed conscience do we act with one part of us listening to God and all of us responding. Then like Abram, we too will go as the Lord directs us.