Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

FAITH FEEDS GUEST GUIDE
CONSCIENCE
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The C21 Center Presents

FAITH FEEDS

The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s biannual magazine, C21 Resources.

The FAITH FEEDS GUIDE offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It’s as simple as deciding to host the gathering wherever your community is found and spreading the word.

All selected articles have been taken from material produced by the C21 Center.
“For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary.”
—The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1776

Here are three articles to guide your FAITH FEEDS conversation. We suggest that you select two that will work best for your group, and if time permits, add in a third. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads.

This guide’s theme is: Conscience
Each summer I finalize my course syllabus for the fall. That syllabus serves to outline the objectives of the course, to distribute course materials reasonably so as to get my students somewhere close to those objectives, and, if that syllabus is really good, to create an arc of questions and themes that will draw students in, ignite the questions, and inspire their own pursuit of understanding the world and themselves more deeply. That last bit, the part about understanding themselves, is usually something we often include in the list of course objectives since we’d be hard-pressed to measure the outcome. In the current educational climate we feel largely ambivalent about education’s role in the moral formation of young adults. Though it’s still embedded in most university mission statements, the character and integrity of our students remains on many campuses a relic of a patriarchal past. So for the most part, the moral lives of our students follow a “second syllabus,” which runs parallel to the ones we use in our classes.

The objectives of the second syllabus are formed long before students arrive in our classrooms and reflect many developmental demands: figure out how to fit in and belong, plug into the community, find space to safely unload a range of personal and emotional baggage, gain habits and skills of “adulting,” and find and develop gifts and talents. The texts of this syllabus are a strange brew of our culture’s romantic-expressivist scripts mixed with one’s own family values and a dash of campus culture: pursue your dreams—as long as the money follows; if you can figure out how to “be yourself,” whatever that might mean, everything will work out as it should; while love and romance are a goal in the long run, it’s important to calculate your currency in the sexual marketplace; learn the hyper-stressing and hyper-unwinding rhythms of the daytime and nighttime campus cultures; create a moral code that is at least practical, if not truly moral.
We hope that this second syllabus is impacted by the first, official syllabi that we hand out at the start of the semester, though we’re hesitant to ask about it. We like to leave it to Student Affairs, Campus Ministry, Mission and Ministry. The reality is that moral growth is among the areas of student development that sees the most expansion in college, particularly among students who attend four-year, primarily residential colleges, but many of us in American higher education seem to have decided to sit this one out. Educational research has long shown that participation in college, especially in the first year, influences moral growth profoundly, even when controlling for a host of other factors including a wide array of demographics, cognitive abilities, and cognitive motivation. In short, something is apparently happening in college that sets the condition for significant growth in moral sensitivity and moral reasoning. And it’s happening despite our best efforts to ignore it.

I find that students are often surprised when I tell them that they brought a moral philosophy with them when they arrived that first day at Boston College. They tend to think they haven’t developed a moral framework yet and are planning to find one when they begin “adulting” at some vague point in the future. The moral codes they bring are typically pragmatic and ruggedly personal, marked with various cultural signposts and capitalist bottom lines. Years ago a good and noble friend told me that he learned what a moral life looked and felt like from reading The Lord of the Rings, since even at a young age he could tell that his family’s notions of integrity, honesty, and courage were pretty lame. What is a young adult to do when her culture gives her such a stripped-down moral sensibility that it’s hard to even construct a scaffold around it to shore it up? How do you build a robust moral conscience when no one around you ever talks about having one or using it? Over the years, I have found that, like my friend, my students have a deep desire for the companionship of good questions and conversations as they wonder about the sufficiency of their own moral philosophies. They feel unsure that they have what they need to become a brave and true friend, to be able to make a promise and keep it, to become a good partner and parent, to do the right thing when it is called for, even in the face of sacrifice. I think it was for this reason that my former student walked with me, telling me of his new ethical theory. It was also why we met up again several weeks later to talk about it and why several of his roommates came along to get in on the conversation.

Pope Francis might agree that it won’t be the incessant buzzing of an alarm clock or the ringtone of my phone under my pillow that awakens my conscience, but instead it is an encounter with another person. It was for this reason that, as his Province’s formation director, the young Jesuit Jorge Bergoglio required that seminarians work in the barrios as they studied theology, to be taught not only by their professors but by the needs of the community. Encounter keeps us grounded and reminds us that the concrete, lived experiences of God’s people are the home base from which we travel as missionaries into the world of theoretical understanding. But it’s not easy to encounter another person as another person. As Rev. Michael Himes notes, most of us experience other people simply as players acting out the bit parts and side roles in the stories of our own lives. Encountering another as another involves finding out what questions, concerns, needs, loves, and values they are living and to make those, at least in part, my own. When the central question that you are asking about yourself and the world becomes a question for me, I am awakened in such a way that what is “outside myself” may deeply move what is “inside myself.” This is surely one of the most important processes of developing moral conscience. I would like to give Pope Francis the last word here. For, he reminds us that the worst thing for a human being is not failure or rejection, but the worst thing is to make ourselves incapable of being moved by the plight of another, the beauty or joy of another, the pain of another, the desire for another. When we become incapable of that, yeah, I’m panicked.

Kerry Cronin is the Associate Director of the Perspectives Program at Boston College
“Conscience is a man’s compass.”
—Vincent Van Gogh

Summary
In this essay author Kerry Cronin reflects on the responsibility of university professors to be engaged in the moral formation of their students. She notes that students often have two syllabii that affect this formation: the one the teachers put in front of them to awaken their hearts and minds, and the one that the culture presents them with which has a different set of priorities and values. In the end, Cronin says that people are formed through authentic encounters with others.

Questions for Conversation
1. Do you agree with Cronin’s assessment of the “second syllabus” that the culture serves us, one which offers advice on how to fit in, find financial success, and “be yourself” - without defining what that is or why it’s good? Is this syllabus helpful, harmful, or both?
2. Did your college experience play a vital role in your own moral formation and reasoning? Why or why not?
3. Cronin cites Pope Francis who says that “the worst thing for a human being is not failure or rejection…but is to make ourselves incapable of being moved by the plight of another, the beauty or joy of another, the pain of another, the desire for another.” Do you agree with him? Do you see this playing out in contemporary culture? Where do you find signs of hope?
Whereas traditional sources of conscience formation in the Catholic tradition include Scripture, church teachings, and moral exemplars like saints, sometimes it is those whose character we are charged with helping to develop, like our own children, who alert us to the demands of conscience.

It was a child who changed me forever as a man and a writer. Sure it was. This was a week after September 11, 2001. I remember that date very well indeed because three of my friends had been murdered on September 11. They were brokers in the towers and they were roasted and crushed to death by a man hiding in a cave in Afghanistan. Tommy and Farrell and Sean, men I had known as boys in our village, Tommy a terrific basketball player and the Lynch brothers burly cheerful guys who were bar bouncers before
becoming brokers. Roasted by a man who cackled in his cave when he heard that thousands of men and women and children had been roasted and crushed and dismembered. Cackled. I don’t forget that cackle. Sometimes I forget it for a day or two but then I remember it again and I work harder at the thing I am supposed to do in this life.

That evening a week after the murders I was standing in our kitchen and telling my wife Mary about how a magazine had called me that day and asked me to contribute to a special issue about September 11 and I said no, Mary, I said no, because what is there to say? I am not adding to the ocean of witless commentary and vengeful rant. The only thing to do is pray in whatever language and to whatever coherent mercy you pray to, ideally silently, because if ever silence was eloquent now is the time.

I said all this with a certain arrogance and fatuity. I did. I was proud of myself and I wanted everyone to know how cool I was in making such a decision.

But, Dad, said our daughter, eight years old, what are you going to do if you don’t write anything?

What?

Dad, no offense, but you are always lecturing us about how if God gives you a tool, and you don’t use that tool, that’s a sin, and Dad, no offense, but you only have the one tool. You say this yourself all the time, you say that you stink at everything else except catching and sharing stories, so if you are not going to catch and share stories, isn’t that a sin? Actually isn’t that three sins, because three of your friends were murdered? Isn’t that right?

And I stood there in our kitchen, staring down at my daughter’s face, her utterly open earnest face, her unfathomable green eyes, her questions piercing me down in places I did not know existed, and I was proud of her, and annoyed, and rattled, and moved, and speechless, and even though that was many years ago now I remember that my wife reached over and put her hand on my hand where my hand was clutching the handle of the battered old dishwasher.

I think sometimes now that for me there was my life before that moment, when I was a writer intent on writing well and being published and selling books and earning a little extra cash so we could almost break even as a family, and there was after that moment, when I saw that my real work was to tell bigger better stories than the thugs and liars of the world. The right story at the right time in the right ear in the right heart shivers things, bends lives and countries and maybe species in a different direction. Can we outwit violence? Can we tell stories that make violence scuttle back into the ancient darkness from which it came? Can we use humor and imagination as the most astounding weapons ever? Can I, can we, catch and share stories of defiant grace and unthinkable courage and unimaginable forgiveness, and flush away the old stories of thugs like bin Laden, the old stories of blood and fear and ash and smoke and children screaming? I think maybe so. I think maybe so. And I think maybe so because one evening in my kitchen a child looked up at me and called me out of my old self and into a new one.

Brian Doyle was the editor of Portland Magazine at the University of Portland.
“Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.”
—Mark 10:15

Summary
In this short reflection, author Brian Doyle recounts a pivotal moment when his daughter awakened his conscience. Doyle was asked to write a piece on September 11, 2001, but because of his mourning and anger, he obstinately refused. His daughter challenged him to see how writing was his vocation, something that God had called him to in order to bring light into darkness. Her prompting moved him “out of [his] old self and into a one.”

Questions for Conversation
• Have you ever been challenged by a child to do something differently or to change your mind? Describe the circumstances or experience.
• Jesus often says that children are better able to receive the Kingdom of God and are closer to understanding His teaching than adults are. Why do you think He says this?
• Doyle notes that “traditional sources of conscience formation in the Catholic tradition include, Scripture, church teachings, and moral exemplars like saints...” What Scriptural passages, Catholic teachings, or holy men and women have shaped your moral imagination and formed your conscience?
Few stories are told more often than the one called “the prodigal son.” But there were two young adults in that story, a father who was prodigal in his love, and a mother who likely encouraged the dad to watch with hope for their lost son to return—and supervised the feast. So it involves a whole family and could have been told of two daughters as well. To rethink it as a family story can help us understand the development of conscience.

When we are kids, our conscience is simply to follow the directives of our parents. This initial stage functions more like a superego than a conscience. It is based on authority, often motivated by the hope of reward or fear of punishment. Our choosing is not based on our own discerning what is right or wrong but on what authorities dictate. Let’s call this Stage One Conscience.

As we come into adolescence and young adulthood, we have a natural tendency to begin to listen to our own heads and hearts in order to discern and choose between right and wrong. Now we can make somewhat autonomous (peers often replace parents) decisions. Let’s call this Stage Two Conscience — when we first have some moral perspective that is our own.

As Stage Two emerges, we often embrace an either/or posture. The “either” is that we become fundamentalist about the ethic of our parents or original authority, embracing it as absolute. While this may sound like Stage One again, Stage Two makes some what autonomous choices. The “or” stance is to reject entirely all those values that we encountered in our parents, original culture, or community of faith. Neither of these stances yet reflects a mature conscience—Stage Three.

In some ways, Stage Three Conscience puts the best of Stage One and Two together. As such, it draws on both the teachings, norms, and traditions of some moral authority outside the self (like one’s family or faith community) but also listens to our own conscience “there we are alone with God, whose voice echoes in our depth” (Gaudium et Spes 16). So a mature conscience takes account of both our own interior reflection and sense of right and wrong, and likewise consults some tradition of ethical norms.
and spiritual wisdom. Mediating between our interior guide and exterior guidelines moves us toward maturity of conscience, with a sense of responsibility to ourselves, others, and the common good.

In this light, let us look again at the behavior of those two young adults and their parents. Clearly the younger one—the “prodigal”—was beginning to make up his own mind about things when he rejected the moral values of his parents, demanded half of the family property, and set off for “a far country” (Luke 15:13). The amazing thing is that the parents consented and off he went. Meanwhile, the eldest son stayed at home. Let us grant that this also was by choice; he knew he could take off like the prodigal and still inherit half the property. Instead he chose to “always do” what his parents commanded. Both youths were at Stage Two Conscience—albeit choosing either/or.

The Prodigal’s wayward life out on the town brings him into a kind of slavery. He fell so far as to eat with pigs, as low as a Jewish lad could sink. However, this helps him to “come to himself”. So he makes a better choice, not based on his own desires alone but on what he remembers of his parents’ values. Out of his own interiority he decides, “I will go home”. He surely knew that this would require him to leave behind the high life of the far country and to re-engage the moral norms of his family.

The Prodigal presumes that his parents will return him to his Stage One moral status—to simply obey what “they” say. He even has a speech ready suggesting as much, that he be treated as no more than an obedient hired hand. Imagine his amazement, then, when the Father rushes out to embrace and welcome home their wayward son, even before his apology—what prodigal love!

But far beyond fitting him back into blind obedience—like a servant—the parents promote the Prodigal within the family—this is what the robe and sandals reflect. They treat him as if all grown up now. Then, to welcome him home fully and celebrate his new moral status, the parents “kill the fatted calf” and a great party ensues.

The Prodigal was welcomed back into the family to act as an adult member—faithful to both his own interiority and to the moral norms of his people. We can presume that he continued to make up his own mind about things, and yet honored the values that marked his parents’ home.

All of us have access to such ethical norms, and especially through our family and faith traditions. Many reflect thousands of years of hard-won wisdom, for example, the Ten Commandments, Jesus’ Beatitudes, or his greatest commandment—to love God and neighbor as oneself. Because such norms reflect great wisdom, we can choose to live them out of conviction rather than coercion, precisely because they are their own reward. It is far more life giving to choose love over hate, honesty over cheating, and so on.

What, then, of the older son? Well, he too had his moment of rebellion. He protests the party and reminds his parents that he had chosen to stay home rather than running away to a sinful life like the Prodigal. He reminds that he had always obeyed them and complains “you have never even given me a young goat to celebrate with my friends”.

The father sympathizes with the elder son’s feelings, even promising “all that is mine is yours” (the youngest had already received his half). Yet the father holds his ground and insists, “we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother…was lost and has been found”. Note that the parents’ love was unconditional for both sons, which is precisely why Jesus told the story; even if in a “far country,” we can always come home to God’s love.

What is the eldest son to do—follow his own sentiments alone (Stage Two) or blend them in with the family’s values of mercy and compassion (Stage Three)? If he got over his peeve, went to the party, and truly celebrated his brother’s return and his parents’ compassion, then he, too, would have embraced a Stage Three Conscience. What do you think? Did he go to the party? Will you?

Thomas H. Groome is a Professor of Theology and Religious Education at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry.
Summary
In this reflection on the development of conscience, Tom Groome uses the story of the Prodigal Son to demonstrate how moral decision-making matures over time and through life experience. Groome makes the case that both of the sons in the story are invited to move beyond blind obedience or rebellion to a more integrated path of discernment and action. The question the author leaves the reader with is, where are you in your own development?

Questions for Conversation
1. Groome says that conscience can be broken down into three stages: 1) acceptance of a received moral framework; 2) rebellion or blind obedience to that framework; and 3) an integration of received moral teachings and personal experience. Do you think these stages are accurate? Have you experienced or passed through any of them? How would you characterize your current understanding of conscience?
2. What have been the sources of moral authority in your life? Who or what has shaped your conscience and your values?
3. Do you think the eldest son in the Biblical story eventually develops a mature conscience? Why or why not?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
  a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.