

If you look up the name Mary Astor, you'll read about an actress who had a long career making 109 movies over 45 years and won an Oscar along the way and had an incredibly successful life. But what you'll also find is someone who not only came to the faith, but came to a very important realization, the same realization that Moses enjoins the people to come to in our first reading. And that is that if we say "yes" to following God, we also have to say "yes" to following God's commandments.

In July of 1959, she wrote an article describing how she came to this realization.

In her own words, she says the most glorious experience of her life was finding Faith. That was in 1939. But the greatest triumph of her life was discovering that Faith all over again, after she thought she had lost it. In her words, her story is the story of what you might call "a backslider."

By the late 1930's Astor had been in the movies for almost 20 years. She knew what it was like to live the "glamorous" life of a Hollywood actress, to be married three times, and to have two children.

She knew too the inner deadness that came from a life lived without purpose other than self-pleasure and indulgence. For years she yearned for contentment, for the security of someone to lean on and take care of her. Then, she found a Faith and a Father.

He came into her life slowly, without her suspecting that He was coming. Idle curiosity had set her to reading books on religion and as she became increasingly interested in the subject, she started asking questions, all very objectively, never thinking that she herself would become involved.

And then, one morning, in one blinding moment of illumination, Astor discovered that she had within her the Gift of Faith. A sentence in a book she was reading suddenly transfixed her. It was a sentence that she had heard and read countless times but whose meaning she had not perceived before in all its ramifications: "Jesus Christ was God."

That moment was the culmination of many months of study, but nonetheless, those four words were a revelation which made her slip to her knees in prayer. They were a key that seemed to unlock the great mysteries, to make everything in her world fall into place. If Christ were

God, and lived on this earth, then anything could happen. Even her tangled life could be untangled. All seemed great. And from that start, she studied and prayed and, with deep love, turned herself over to Christ.

For a year she says she lived on a pink cloud. She luxuriated in the warmth of having a loving Father, one who would protect her. Not only was she happy within, but the world outside contributed handsomely; her home functioned well, her children were eager with affection, her career was in high gear with good pictures and a popular radio show of her own.

In another year, however, the pink cloud had turned to gray and each succeeding year it grew blacker. A divorce; a remarriage; unemployment; sickness; sleeping pills, drinking; end of the marriage; loneliness; efforts to work and pray and find herself once more, yet wishing fervently that she could be released from the sheer confusion of living. So, what had happened she wondered?

Where was the loving Father who would take care of her she thought to herself? Throughout the years of wretchedness, her faith itself had

remained intact; the great Truths were still true. Why then, was it not enough?

Reaching rock bottom, upon a recommendation, she went to see a priest-psychologist, the Reverend Peter Ciklic, Ph.D., and together they began working at understanding more about who Mary really was and what she was looking for and what she needed to do.

Month in, month out, in the quiet of his study, she revealed to Father Ciklic the mistakes and misfortunes of her life and slowly, through their discussions, the ignorance she had of herself was stripped away. She began to see the habit patterns she had lived by and how they had led her astray.

With new insights in mind, she went back and applied them to the period after her first discovery of Faith. One of her first realizations was that her faith had not failed her but that she had failed it.

When God came into her life, she was still yearning for someone to love her, someone on whom she could lean for decisions and direction. At first,

in the emotional cloud of her baptism, she was confident that that Person was God.

Astor was so happy in finding a Father Whom she could love and Who could love her that she felt protected from the troubles of the world. She did not grasp the fact that all of us, with or without God, are up to our necks in reality, that problems will besiege us daily.

But perhaps the greatest error she says she made was her failure to understand the true meaning of “The Gift of Faith.” The power to believe is truly a gift from God, just as much as life itself is a gift. Faith cannot be earned or bargained for, it is simply given to us in the same fashion that God endows us with health or talent or beauty.

A good pianist is said to be “gifted”, but of what value is this special gift unless he works to develop it? The same is true of Faith; once we have received it, it is up to us to decide whether we shall use it—or waste it.

Somehow, in the joy of receiving this great gift, Astor says she did not realize that there was a choice that she would have to make. She didn't see

that Faith imposes a personal responsibility. "Go and walk alone with God" she had been told, and with those words she assumed that she would go forth safely. She says she didn't understand that she herself would have to do the walking; God would show her the way, but He would not carry her.

Walking takes individual initiative and often courage and struggle, but she was not prepared to struggle. All she wanted was someone to lean on; so she leaned, and she fell.

Had she known enough about herself then, she says, she would have seen that she was the same human being, throbbing with life and desire, as she had been before. She says she would have recognized how easy a prey she was to temptation, to flattery, to a drink thrust into her hand, and she would have guarded against it.

And she realized she had to form her conscience. As she puts it: When God gave us life, He also gave us free will, the power to choose and decide. Formal religion defines what is right and what is wrong and with our consciences, as well, in play, we should be able to discern the pitfalls.

But she rightly points out we humans have a habit of rationalizing things so that when we want to do something that our conscience says “no” to, we convince ourselves that it is right or that it is the only possible thing for us to do. This is a form of dishonesty, and at that she says she was an expert. What she needed was prayer and the guidance of the Church.

She closes by saying:

In my early maturity I suppose I thought that if I had Faith, I would be happy. But happiness doesn't drop out of heaven that easily, and people who expect happiness to “happen” are fooling themselves. It comes only by loving and learning and working and it cannot be a goal in itself.

I read that there was no Hebrew word for “learned”—as in “a wise or learned man.” The word for that is “learning.” Though I know I cannot claim to be a wise woman, I still like to think Of myself as a learning one. Daily I am learning from the mistakes of my backsliding. Each day I am working and praying that I may stay as strong as my faith.

So the question for us is are we learning to? Are we continuing to understand what it means to follow God's law? Or are we making up excuses along the way or picking and choosing what to follow?

In our first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses enjoins the people to keep God's commandments, and that it is written on the people's hearts. This is so important and timeless, because it gets at a very important point that Mary Astor came to realize: that there *is* a higher truth. That the law is something we don't just make up as we go along, but is something we are called to follow.

We see evidence of this in culture. Across faiths and cultures, there are certain things that are praised and certain things that are condemned. Taking of a human life; robbery; or the virtue of bravery of a soldier; an act of kindness to someone; hospitality. It's as if people are hard-wired to not do certain things and to do other things. '

Conscience is what is our interior judge for our moral choices. The catechism quotes the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, which tells us "Deep within his conscience, man discovers a law which he has not laid

upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment...For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God...His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths." We are all called to listen to our conscience, but for that to happen it has to be formed.

The problem though we face is moral relativism. The culture may say hey that's fine but you don't have to impose that on me. Certainly there are individual preferences; the Vikings and Packers; chocolate and vanilla; summer or winter. But there is also that higher law that we know is there, because all of us have a voice inside of us that tells us right and wrong. It's the response to faith that Moses speaks of, and that Mary Astor came to realize. So what are we to do?

Here are some things that I think we can do to make sure our consciences are being properly formed.

First, ask yourself who are you listening to. Culture will tell us do whatever you want as long as it doesn't harm anyone. But the lie is that even things

the culture would say are just fine lead ultimately to diminishment and harm us. There are people who are there to help us, but even they at times might not have been properly formed. For instance, how many kids learn that you don't have to go to Mass because it's not that big of a deal? Or even from a well-intended parent, they may be improperly formed in part of the moral law. Enter the Church. We need to be open to listening to the voice of God in the Scriptures and through Tradition. The catechism states that "in the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path." It's important to try to pay attention at Mass to the readings, and to also spend time with the Scriptures, picking up a good Catholic Study Bible that will have explanations of the readings at the bottom in footnotes. Tradition with a capital "T" doesn't mean the tradition of having a February bingo night like we have after Mass, but means the authoritative teachings of the Church. This is tough to do; but remember the Church is there to shepherd us, which is what the miter of the bishop symbolizes. Not every single thing the Church teaches is a dogma, meaning there may be things that you disagree with. But when there is something difficult, the temptation can be "I'll decide for myself what is right and wrong." As I've said before, if there is a teaching you struggle with, grapple with it, think about it, and pray over it.

Making up one's own moral code without the aid of the Church is not wisdom; that's arrogance. .

Second, I think it's good to continually pay attention to the decisions we make and make a daily examination of conscience and also make use of the sacrament of reconciliation, because the more we do something, the more we are likely to repeat it, and this can affect conscience in a positive or negative kind of way. So what kind of life are you leading? Mary Astor took a hard look at herself in the mirror. It could be that someone misses Mass for a valid reason; but then they want to sleep in, or say "I go once a month" or "I do nice things during the week" and gradually get away from it out of habit. Just as you don't lose weight overnight but get healthy through diet and exercise that is consistent, the same is true for the conscience and soul – it stays healthy by being constantly fed and kept in shape.

Third, we need to consult and do fact-checking to make sure our information is correct. Don't just use wikipedia, an online forum, or what a family member says. Sometimes people get bad information that is handed down to them from family members, or are raised in an environment where a conscience can become much too harsh or too lax on certain areas.

Once we get older, it's up to us to do our homework by talking to other people and reading up on what the Church teaches, and getting clarification if there's something that's confusing.

Fourth, ask yourself if you are going above and beyond or just doing the bare minimum? The scholar of the law leads a good life, but Jesus knows he can do even more. Going to Mass is a start, but it should spur us to action. We should think about how charitable we are with our time, and how we strive to truly love others.

We also remember that it's a process, and when we fall, we don't just justify our sin, but we pick ourselves up with God's help and remember he loves, and He forgives. It means seeking out reconciliation, owning up to our shortcomings, learning from our mistakes, and using forgiveness as a springboard to becoming a better person.

We also too have to be on guard with emotion. Emotion's a great thing. But if we just think with our heart, we can justify things that are immoral. We might think it's mean to talk about the truth of this moral principle, so stay silent and not help someone. Emotion can sometimes cloud the moral

issue too; for instance many people know someone who has a same sex attraction. Holding that God made us male and female and marriage is ordered to that by God is not cruel; we can still love all people. Or we may be outraged at a murderer and talk ourselves into justifying the death penalty based on that emotion and that taking another life also is wrong. The heart and head always need to be balanced.

Finally, we always need to remember that we can help one another come to know what is right or to move away from it. The scholar seeks Jesus out. He wants to do better. And Jesus gives Him the roadmap. How we act influences people greatly, because if we are going to be people of faith and profess it as we will do shortly in our Nicene Creed, we also have to walk the walk. Sometimes we need to be blunt with someone who is going down a wrong path and making decisions that harm themselves or other people, telling them what they don't want to hear; other times we just need to keep praying and reaching out to people hoping that they will eventually figure things out. But part of self-policing is making sure we aren't doing things we shouldn't because when others see how we act and know that we are Christian, especially young people whose consciences are very influential, we can have such a big impact for the better or for the worse with people.

One of the things that I love with the Catholic Church is you rarely will ever hear a Catholic say “I was saved on July 13th, 2019” or something like that, because while there may be a particular day where we accept Jesus, we come to know him more and more each day. We do that by following the law written on our hearts! God’s law, which is a divine truth, is given to us out of love and meant to be a roadmap for us to find the way to heaven. The problem is some don’t want to learn how to unfold the map or read the GPS instruction manual called our conscience, which, when we use it, can make us not a better person each year but each day who is better equipped to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Mary Astor won an Oscar, but by learning how to follow God more deeply and respond to the faith, I’d suggest she may be a lot more happy about winning the crown of eternal life which she did by following a script given to her and written on her heart from her loving God. So let’s do the same.