



Second Sunday of Advent B
December 6, 2020

- **Dealing With Guilt—Healthy and Unhealthy**
- **Seven Types of Conscience**
- **10 Commandments for Scrupulous People**

In today's first reading, we listened to God speak through the prophet Isaiah in the following words:

*"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her **guilt** is expiated."*

With the exception of the psychopath and the most hardened of hearts, all of us feel guilt on a fairly regular basis. If we have a scrupulous conscience, we live in a constant state of guilt. Guilt is that unpleasant feeling we get when we realize that we have done something we believe is wrong or when we fail to do what we know is right.

We can experience guilt about all kinds of things. For example, we may feel guilty for having said or done something to someone. Even though what we said may have been true, we realize upon reflection that it did not need to be said or done in that particular situation. Our unwarranted words or actions may have been directed at our family, parish, work or social setting. Our words and actions may have left another person hurt and diminished in a way that was not necessary, and we feel guilty.

We may experience guilt in connection with our *role, duties and responsibilities* as a spouse, parent, priest, sister, single person, boss, or employee, believing that we are failing in some way. We may feel guilty for neglecting to carry out our duties and responsibilities. We may even feel guilty thinking that our *best efforts* are not good enough for others or for ourselves. Parents may feel guilty because an adult child is living in with his/her boy/girlfriend and has stopped going to church. Adult sons and daughters may feel guilty for not giving their aging parents enough time and care. Caring for a sick loved one may cause us a lot of guilt for wishing at times the loved one would die. Children often carry considerable guilt within a family situation. They may blame themselves for the fights between their parents or for their parents' divorce, or even for the death of a parent.

We may experience guilt in connection with our *relationship with God*. We feel guilty because of our failure to pray, or because we only give God the last few minutes of our day when we are tired. We feel guilty because we are constantly thinking of other things when we are praying and our efforts at prayer are very poor. As parents, we may judge that we have done a poor job of passing on our Christian beliefs and practices to our children.

Many people experience a lot of guilt in the area of *sexuality*. Our parents—or the Church—may have told us that the worst kind of sins are sexual sins. Hence, we may harbor guilt because of impure thoughts, words and deeds. We may feel guilty when we look at *poverty* in our world and judge that we are not generous enough when it comes to sharing our material blessings with the poor. We may carry a lot of guilt because of *past failures*, e.g., abortion, adultery, stealing, failure to be a good example to our children, etc. Even though we may have confessed past failures, we may still carry guilt. I'm sure each of us could add numerous examples to the above list of reasons that generate guilt in our lives.

When it comes to the topic of guilt, it is very important for us to distinguish between what spiritual counselors and psychologists call *healthy* and *unhealthy* guilt (or *true* and *false* guilt, or *appropriate* and *inappropriate* guilt).

HEALTHY GUILT

Because in the past, the 'guilt thing' was overdone in some homes, schools and churches, some people today *overreact* by trying to free themselves (and their children) from *all* guilt. They want to live 'guilt-free' lives. This is a huge mistake.

If we look closely at some of Jesus' teachings and actions, we notice that he did not only try to free people from their sins and from guilt (e.g., the Samaritan woman for her several failed marriages, and Peter for his denial of Jesus), but he also told *stories intended to create guilt* (and positive action) in people who had become insensitive to wrongdoing in their lives. For example, if we reflect on the parables of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), we see that Jesus was condemning the behavior of the

rich man who was insensitive to the poor, condemning the Levite and the priest for ignoring the wounded man on the side of the road, and denouncing the self-righteous behavior of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus was saying to his audience and to us that we *should feel guilty* if we behave like the rich man, the Levite, the priest and the elder son.

In his book *Whatever Became of Sin?*, the famous and highly regarded psychiatrist, Karl Meninger, lamented that too many of his peers were trying to free their patients from *all* guilt by helping them to believe that they were not guilty of *any* wrongdoing. In contrast, Dr. Meninger discovered that *when he helped his patients to take responsibility for their wrongdoing, they invariably started to get better*. When we try to free ourselves or others from real guilt, we are doing no one a favor. When we do or say wrong things, we need to have the courage and humility to acknowledge our wrongdoing and repent of it. Some examples of when it is healthy to feel guilty:

- Failing to treat others or their property with respect
- Hurting the good name of others
- Being unjust and untruthful in our relationships with others
- Manipulating others for our selfish gain
- Ignoring poverty in our midst
- Abusing our body with excessive use of food, alcohol or drugs
- Using sex not as an expression of committed love but simply as a way to pleasure oneself
- Being lazy and inattentive to our relationship with God; missing Mass for no good reason

If in the past, parents, schools and churches laid too much guilt on people, there is a danger today that the pendulum is swinging too far in the other direction.

We may need to ask ourselves if we are numbing our consciences, rationalizing our actions and refusing to feel *appropriate guilt* for actions that are clearly wrong and hurtful to others, ourselves, and our relationship with God.

UNHEALTHY GUILT

If there is such a thing as good and healthy guilt, there is also such a thing as bad and unhealthy guilt, the kind that diminishes us as persons. This happens when we feel guilty for things that we need not feel guilty about. Some examples:

- We are doing all we can to care for a sick loved one but yet feeling guilty for not doing more; for being resentful that our life is totally absorbed in caring for our loved one; for placing our loved one in a

nursing facility, when we can no longer properly care for the person.

- Blaming ourselves for the wrongdoing of our adult children and thinking: "If only I had raised them differently." Perhaps mistakes were made. If so, guilt is appropriate and we need simply to confess our failures in that area of our lives to God and, if helpful, to those we failed.
- Feeling guilty for past actions that we only now realize to be wrong but which we did not believe to be so then, e.g., abortion. But, of course, it is probably still good to confess especially serious wrongdoing like an abortion.
- Feeling guilty for separating from or divorcing an abusive spouse; feeling guilty for not being the *perfect* mom or dad, son or daughter, spouse or friend.
- Feeling guilty for missing church even though we were sick or traveling and could not get to a church without great inconvenience.
- Perhaps the saddest example of inappropriate guilt is the guilt children experience when their parents' divorce or when they are sexually abused.

Inappropriate guilt takes on an excessive form when we feel guilty for just about everything. We may only be rid of such excessive guilt through intensive spiritual counseling that helps free us from the feeling that God is a tyrant (which scrupulous people believe *unconsciously*), and introduce us to a God of love.

DEALING WITH GUILT—THREE RESPONSES

When dealing with guilt, we can choose one of three possible reactions. We can deny guilt by suppressing it. We can go around feeling horrible about past failures, but doing nothing to free ourselves of our guilt. Both of these responses are obviously not unhelpful. A third and helpful option is to face our guilt, and check to see if it is appropriate or inappropriate guilt. We may conclude, "Yes, I have indeed violated my conscience," in which case we can take the necessary action to free ourselves of this guilt. What might be elements of constructive *action* that will help us to release inappropriate guilt from our lives?

First, name our wrongdoing and take responsibility for it. In the Garden of Eden, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent for their sin of disobedience. It takes *courage* and *humility* to recognize our wrongdoing.

Second, confess our wrongdoing. When considering this, we need to remember that our God is a God of infinite mercy. If God could forgive David for adultery and cold-blooded murder, he can forgive us. If Jesus on the Cross could forgive the repentant thief and his executioners, surely he will forgive our failings. If we

have a problem believing in a merciful God, we should recall the words of Jesus: *"I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 righteous people who have no need to repent"* (Luke 15:7). An excellent prayer for this is Psalm 51 (David's prayer of contrition for his sins).

Catholics have the practice of confessing wrongdoings to a priest in the **Sacrament of Reconciliation**. Many find the exercise of telling another their wrongdoings and *hearing* the words of absolution a very healing experience. In sacramental reconciliation, penitents experience God's mercy in a very tangible way and receive God's grace.

Third, restitution. If we need to make amends or restitution to someone, we should do the best we can. If we can't make *full* restitution of property we stole, we need to return back as much as we can. If we can't make restitution *directly* to the store or institution, we should at least give a donation to charity. If we have hurt someone by our words or deeds, we should let him/her know that we are sorry. We can do this verbally or through a letter. God's mercy never excuses us from doing what we can to mitigate the damage caused by our wrongdoing.

SEVEN TYPES OF CONSCIENCE

Conscience is the voice of God within, helping us to distinguish good from evil. Over the centuries, theologians have identified many types of conscience. The following are seven of them:

1. A *bad conscience* has little or no regard for what is right or wrong. It wants to answer to no authority.
2. An *erroneous conscience* conflicts with God's word and/or the teachings of the Church. One may have an erroneous conscience and not know it, e.g., having an abortion and believing it is not wrong; skipping Mass on a regular basis for no good reason and being convinced that it is not wrong.
3. A *weak conscience* knows what is right but does not have the courage, the will, or the moral strength to do the right thing, e.g., not speaking out in the workplace when someone is being treated badly or when Christian values are being put down; struggling with some addiction.
4. A *scrupulous conscience* believes that one is frequently sinning when that is not the case. Many Catholics raised in the pre-Vatican II Church were especially scrupulous about sexuality issues. Today, the opposite is generally true.
5. A *lax conscience* is insensitive to the good that ought to be done and the evil that ought to be shunned, e.g., lack of compassion for the poor, tolerance of racial

prejudice, sexual permissiveness, drug and alcohol abuse.

6. A *rebellious conscience* shows little or no respect for biblical and Church teaching, asserting: "I don't care what the Church or the Bible says; I will do what I want."

7. A *true Catholic conscience* is formed and informed by the teachings of Scripture and the Church, i.e., being open to what these teachings say about a particular moral issue.

Any of us may have several of the above conscience types at the same time. For example, we may have a *scrupulous conscience* concerning sexuality issues and a *lax conscience* about justice issues. We may be well informed about some moral issues and know nothing about other issues. Then again, there may be a moral area where we suffer from a *weak conscience*, i.e., we know what is right but we fail to do it, or we know what is wrong and yet we do it.

TWO EXTREMES: SCRUPULOSITY AND RATIONALIZATION

In the past, especially in pre-Vatican II days, many Catholics had guilt piled on them by the Church. It may have seemed like we were always sinning especially in the area of sexuality. Such preaching spiritually damaged many good Catholics. Later, in therapy, they would have to deal with 'Catholic guilt.'

Today, it seems the pendulum has swung the other way so much that Catholics give themselves 'a pass' on issues that are still considered sinful by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, e.g., cohabitating prior to marriage, pre-marital sex, racist thoughts and actions, intentionally holding onto hurts, straight out lying, stealing, watching pornography, missing Mass for no good reason, etc. While missing Mass in person during Covid-19 is not a sin, we are obligated to participate in Mass on TV or through the Internet. *Laxity* on moral issues is widespread today. Slowly but surely we can begin to tell ourselves that certain things that are clearly wrong are no longer wrong as far as we are concerned. The challenge is to avoid the curse of scrupulosity (seeing sin where there is no sin) and laxity and rationalization—giving ourselves a pass on things that our Church continues to consider sinful.

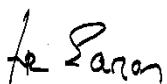
Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous

Since 1964, the Redemptorist Order has sponsored Scrupulous Anonymous, a support group for people who suffer from scrupulosity. This article was published as part of the organization's monthly newsletter.

1. *Without exception, you shall not confess sins you have already confessed.*
2. *You shall confess only sins that are clear and certain.*
3. *You shall not repeat your penance or any of the words of your penance after confession—for any reason.*
4. *You shall not worry about breaking your pre-Communion fast unless you put food and drink in your mouth and swallow a meal.*
5. *You shall not worry about powerful and vivid thoughts, desires and imaginings involving sex and religion unless you deliberately generate them for the purpose of offending God.*
6. *You shall not worry about powerful and intense feelings, including sexual feelings or emotional outbursts, unless you deliberately generate them to offend God.*
7. *You shall obey your confessor when he tells you never to repeat a general confession of sins already confessed to him or another confessor.*
8. *When you doubt your obligation to do or not do something, you will see your doubt as proof that there is no obligation.*
9. *When you are doubtful, you shall assume that the act of commission or omission you're in doubt about is not sinful, and you shall proceed without dread of sin.*
10. *You shall put your total trust in Jesus Christ, knowing he loves you as only God can and that he will never allow you to lose your soul.*

For the complete article, visit <http://Bit.ly/2xaOquT>

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fr. Aaron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.