GUILT

“I can’t take the guilt,” says a person in an adulterous relationship.  “I must do something about it because it is killing me.”

We have all met or heard of people who will say, “I can’t take the guilt.”  Many 9/11 firefighters feel guilty for being alive after 343 of their comrades died.  People who grow up in situations of alcohol, abuse, and divorce say, “I am responsible,” even when they have done nothing wrong.

Sometimes we read about terrible criminals who commit horrific crimes and they sleep like babies.  A person who can do evil things and feel no guilt is a sociopath and there have been many in history.

The torture of scruples is a great burden.  It is a form of compulsivity akin to hand washing or checking the stove over and over.  Some people do it with what they think are sins.  Nationalities seem prone to guilt.  People say they can’t help feeling guilty because they are Irish or Jewish or Italian, but no nationality has the corner on guilt.

Others say, “My mother…my children…make me feel so guilty.  I have to do everything for everybody and when I take a moment for myself, I feel guilty.  People will visit their older relatives and hear, “You never come to visit me” and guilt is the result.

Guilt is a feeling of discomfort, unease, mental pain, an ache from the soul.  There are two types of guilt; good guilt and bad guilt.  Some guilt is healthy and some guilt is destructive and not what God wants of us.  Good guilt is rational and healthy whereas bad guilt is unhealthy, irrational, and destructive.

As children, we learn rules and laws from parents, church, society, and school.  When we break these rules we feel bad.  As we grow up, we reflect on these rules.  We think about them and eventually, we develop principles, a conscience.  Conscience is not a little voice.  It is not even a feeling we have.  It is a judgment of what is right or wrong.  If we go against our conscience, if we do something that we have come to believe is wrong, we feel bad.  That’s good!  We should feel bad when we go against our consciences.

Some psychologists and modern experts have promised a guilt-free life.  They blame religion for making us feel guilty.  I think this is a dangerous idea.  A key sign of adult formation is the ability to recognize when we have done wrong.  Good guilt tells us we must change behaviors that are harmful to ourselves or others.  Just as we bleed when we are cut, just as pain is a symptom of something wrong in our body, good guilt tells us we have hurt others or ourselves by our sinful choices.  We feel remorse.  We should do something about his feeling.  We should ask God for forgiveness.  Seek a reconciliation if it involves others.  Make restitution if possible.  And, most of all, change our behavior.

What I have said about good guilt is obvious and most of us do not have a problem with it.  On the contrary, many of us feel guilty when we should not and it is not what the Lord wishes for us.  Jesus said, “I have come to set you free.”

Irrational or bad guilt is when we feel bad about things for which we are not responsible.  It is when we think we have done things wrong.  Somehow, we have a vague sense floating around inside us that we are bad, guilty, sinful.  We feel this almost all the time.  Bad guilt focuses on the doer rather than the deed.  If we correct a child, we correct the action, not the child.  A child breaks a lamp, for example.  It was wrong to break the lamp, but the child is not bad.  Shame is akin to guilt.  Shame is a feeling of worthlessness and feeling ashamed for who we are.  Guilt is feeling bad for what we think we did wrong.

Some of us are more guilt prone than others.  I’m not sure why.  It has something to do with how we grew up and what we learned and self-image.  An example of unhealthy guilt is missing Mass.  We feel wrong even though we have two broken legs, were in the hospital, and a hurricane was about to hit the island.  We have done nothing wrong, but we fell better telling a priest about it.  It is not a big deal, but it is a sign of feeling guilty even when we have done nothing wrong.

Parents and their adult children is another major area.  “My kids don’t go to church.  Where did I go wrong?  We brought them to church.  We sent them to Catholic schools (or to CCD or religious ed).  It’s my fault.”  No, it is not your fault.  They are adults.  We can feel sad they do not practice their faith because we love it, but guilt is not appropriate.

Sexuality and marriage is another area.  Sometimes people feel guilty about their sexual feelings.  Sex in marriage is a sacrament.  It is holy and not something to be guilty about.

Heroic care of a sick spouse or parents.  It is difficult.  We feel guilty about losing patience or feeling the burden and unhealthy guilt is the result.  We fail to see how loving we are trying to be and the good we are doing.

Death of a loved one is another.  “If I had only been there.”  “If I had seen things sooner.”  “If I had taken them to a different hospital.”  Every decision is replayed.  We are not God.  We can’t prevent death.  Would our beloved dead want us to feel bad for the rest of our lives?

If guilt is severe, go to a counselor or to a priest or religious sister or brother.  With less severe guilt, the ordinary dose, recognize that I am not God.  I cannot take responsibility for the whole world.  I am human.  I do fail.  If you are a perfectionist, give yourself a break.  Remember that Jesus died to save sinners.  He loves sinners.  It is the righteous that God challenged the most.

Some special areas of guilt are past sins that are replayed over and over.  Failures of our youth.  Something that cannot be undone.  Our past sins haunt us.  We keep saying, “How could I have done that?”  It is really pride.  I choose to be judge and jury rather than let God.

Guilt puts the stress on how bad I am.  Contrition puts the focus on how forgiving God is.  It is unfair to judge the past by the present.  Sometimes the effect of sin afflicts us.   It has a temporal effect like creaky joints affected by the weather.  In the case of abortion, love the children around you.  Stole something?  Give to charity.  Vicious gossip?  Say kind things.

Our Jewish ancestors had a ritual of using a goat - called a scapegoat - to whisper their sins to and then it was driven out into the desert.  This ritual was seeking to unburden people from their sins.  Catholics do not have a goat, but we do have the Lamb of God.  And God’s love is stronger than the power of sin.  God invites us into forgiveness.  At Mass, we pray, “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.”  This is a time to give to Jesus all the guilt we carry and cannot resolve.  Let it go.  Give it to Jesus.  He comes to set us free.

Peter and Judas both did bad things.  Both feel great guilt and remorse.  One can believe in mercy and one cannot.  Let it go.  Believe in mercy.