

CATHOLIC

Q & A

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What is Catholic guilt?

Catholic guilt is a pejorative term used by people to imply that the Catholic Church foists on its members a guilt complex to control their behavior.

It is often said that the three things that keep people from entering into the Catholic Church is ignorance as to what the Church teaches, prejudice based on cultural anti-Catholicism, and scandalous behavior by those who profess themselves to be Catholic.

Guilt is an emotion that human beings experience when they commit an immoral act. Our emotions and feelings are part of our human nature and are an integral component of our day to day living. Like, dislike, desire, aversion, joy, sadness, hope, despair, courage, fear and anger are basic emotions that are the driving force behind our actions.

Emotions are said to be properly ordered when they are identified and made subject to our intellect and our will. Take for example the emotion of anger. When an event or circumstance creates within me a feeling of anger, I need to initially identify the feeling and then ask why do I feel that way? When the emotion has been identified and analyzed, then action can then take place. In this way, my emotions are made subject to my intellect and will and I begin to live life in a fully integrated way.

With regard to the emotion of guilt, there is a healthy application of this emotion and there is an unhealthy application. Remember, God created us with these various emotions, and when employed properly they lead to a higher good. When applied improperly or suppressed, they can lead to emotional distress, which may even manifest itself in physical illness. Without the proper sense of guilt for wrongdoing, there would be no need for repentance or turning to God for healing.

The Church has always taught that through the sacrament of baptism we receive three theological virtues, which are faith, hope and charity. Hope, broadly defined, is the desire for something together with the expectation of obtaining it. Hope in the supernatural order is a divine virtue by which we confidently expect, with God's help, to reach heaven and have at our disposal the means of securing it.

Hope can be diminished or extinguished by either presumption or despair. To deny guilt is to say that the individual is without sin and therefore presumes his status of righteousness before God without a proper disposition of humility and repentance. An overemphasis of guilt to the exclusion of God's mercy and forgiveness leads to despair. The thought that God's mercy is not sufficient to expunge my guilt.

Presumption and despair are deformities that arise from the misuse and misunderstanding of guilt. A healthy understanding and use of the emotion of guilt will always lead to a deeper love and knowledge of God.

On the natural level, the sense of guilt is often used by people as a method of control. We often see this take place between family members, in the workplace and in other social relationships. By making the other party feel a sense of guilt for some action they did or failed to do, and in turn that party then thinks and acts with an improper and unhealthy sense of guilt in order to please the perpetrating party. This misapplication of guilt results in psychological imprisonment.

Far from the Church trying to control its people with a guilt complex, the Church actually desires liberation for its members. The Church over the centuries has taught that true liberation comes from detachment from people and things. Detachment from people in the proper sense means that we remain engaged in society, but are bound and culpable by God's decrees and not by how others feel about us.

Pope Gregory the Great who lived in the 6th - 7th century said that while going into battle with the enemy, we should be naked, for if Satan senses our attachment to things of this world, he will use those same attachments to pin us to the floor. St Frances DeSales, a 16th century spiritual master also spoke about detachment as did St. Therese of Lisieux, the little flower, who lived in the late 19th century.

Modern Psychology has just stumbled on this issue with its study of co-dependency, which deals with the misunderstanding that who I am as a person is determined by what other people think and feel about me.

Codependency is a most deeply rooted, compulsive behavior that is born out of our sometimes moderately, sometimes extremely dysfunctional family systems. We attempt to use others-our mates, our friends, and even our children, as our sole source of identity, value and well being.

Codependents are not aware of how they feel, have difficulty in identifying and expressing their feelings and tend to worry how others may react to their feelings. Codependents are more aware of what others feel, assume responsibility for other people's feelings and allow their serenity to be affected by how others feel and behave.

Codependents condition feeling good about themselves on being liked by others and receiving approval from others. They bolster their self-esteem by trying to solve other people's problems and relieve other people's pain. They look to other people's feelings in determining what to do or say.

Codependents often times have difficulty in making decisions and tend to value other people's opinions more than their own. They have to feel "needed" in order to have a relationship with others.

In relationships, codependents will diminish their social circle as they become involved with another person. Link their dreams for the future to the other person. Feel overly responsible for the other person's behavior and try to control the other person's appearance and dress, feeling that these things are a reflection on them.

The Church as a loving Mother desires us to develop spiritually. Unhealthy feelings of guilt and codependency are blockages to spiritual growth.

Sources: CODA Handbook

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