

YOUTH UPDATE

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GUILT



LUKE GOLDBRITH

Name It, Claim It, Clear It Up!

Dave Berger (18), Katie Borchers (18), Emily Selhorst (18) and Sara Wehrkamp (18), all members of St. Louis Parish in North Star, Ohio, gathered at the invitation of Johna Hemmelgarn, parish director of youth ministry, to review this issue of *Youth Update*. They asked the questions which are answered here, suggested the title you now see, and made other helpful observations.

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by *Kathiann M. Kowalski*

Does guilt get you down? If so, you can do something about it! Consider the following situation. (The names of all teens, as well as the circumstances in which they've found themselves, are made up—to protect the guilty!)

Sixteen-year-old Craig feels anxious. His parents wouldn't have let him attend Brett's party last weekend if they had known no adults would chaperone.

So Craig didn't tell them. Not only would there be parents there, he lied, but there would certainly be no alcohol.

Craig enjoyed himself and he doubts his parents will discover

the lie. Nevertheless, Craig is uneasy. In a word, he feels guilty.

The longer Craig lets his guilt fester, the worse he'll feel. Instead of ignoring his feelings, Craig must address them.

Powerful Force

Guilt has been a human emotion ever since Adam and Eve hid from God after eating the forbidden fruit in Eden (Genesis 3:8-10). We experience it as a mental preoccupation with the past, a sinking feeling in the stomach or a cloud blocking our ability to enjoy life.

Or we might feel nervous, anxious, even worthless. It's

9. Repentance may cure guilt, but it doesn't always cure guilty feelings. What else can you do to shake those bad feelings? *• Speak with the priest when you receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Ask anyone you've hurt to forgive you. Talk to God in prayer. Take positive steps to show Christ's love to others. That should help replace negative guilty feelings with positive emotions. If guilt still eats at you, psychological counseling might help. Ask your youth minister or school counselor for a referral.*

that feeling of shame and confusion the biblical Ezra sensed when he wrote, "[O]ur wicked deeds are heaped up above our heads and our guilt reaches up to heaven" (Ezra 9:6).

Guilt can follow sinful acts, like lying or hurting someone else. Or it can come from omissions, like failing to report a classmate carrying a gun against school rules.

Sometimes guilt grows gradually, like Craig's increasing unease after lying to his parents. Other times an event triggers it. Take teenage Abby, for instance.

If Abby's boyfriend breaks up with her, she may become overwhelmed by guilt because they engaged in sexual relations outside marriage. While they dated, Abby may have convinced herself it was somehow justified because, of course, they loved each other.

Critics of Catholicism complain that the Church dumps too much guilt on us. But guilt is not bad. Indeed, if people never felt guilty, they'd see little reason not to lie, steal or murder. Chaos would reign!

Despite jokes about guilt being the ultimate Catholic emotion, the Church wants us to deal with guilt, not wallow in it. Just like a warning signal on a car's dashboard, guilt feelings tell us there's something wrong "under the hood."

"One of the most important aspects of healthy living is having self-respect," explains Judith Allik, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Dayton who studies the psychology of religion. "A person who ignores guilt feelings will not have that sense of self-respect. The person who suppresses guilt feelings will be anxious or unhappy."

Why does this happen? Teens who squash down guilt feelings after they've sinned delude themselves into thinking sin is O.K. José may decide that

whacking his brother was justified because he's such a pest. Jenny may rationalize that her shoplifting didn't matter because corporations are rich already.

Rather than repenting, these teens are ready to sin and hurt others again. It's hard to really respect yourself with an attitude

everything.

None of these teens did anything wrong, however. They feel false guilt rather than moral guilt. Their dilemmas are basically psychological rather than religious.

To deal with your guilt, then, decide whether you have sinned. If you have real moral



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like that.

On the other hand, if Abby suppresses guilt about her sexual activity, she may emotionally withdraw from others. She may even tolerate abusive relationships later on. Guilt can become a destructive force.

Real Guilt

Guilt is a sure sign that something is wrong. But there's a big difference between feeling guilty and being guilty.

Alex may feel guilty that he survived after friends died in a car accident. Victimized by rape, Allison may believe she should somehow have prevented the attack. Jessie may feel so worthless after enduring years of physical and emotional abuse that she feels guilty about

guilt, you need to repent, which we'll talk about in a minute. But even if your feelings are false guilt, don't ignore or suppress the issue.

Counseling and support groups can help teens like Alex, Allison and Jessie deal with grief, victimization, abuse and other circumstances that can foster false guilt. If helplessness, hopelessness and a sense of poor self-worth persist, teens may need continuing psychological treatment. If that's the case, ask a guidance counselor, doctor or other health practitioner for referrals.

Other cases may be far less severe. For example, teens who take frequent false guilt trips may want to learn how to head off unfair manipulation by others (see box on last page).

Before jumping to the conclusion that your feelings must be false guilt, however, think carefully. High school students can have a tough time accepting

personal responsibility for their behavior. Many teens try to blame someone else, just as Adam and Eve did (Genesis 3:12-13).

Other teens use rationalization. "They try to rethink the matter to approve of their choice in some way," explains Thomas Gallagher, who teaches theology at St. Augustine Academy in Lakewood, Ohio. Indeed, when people of any age sin in the first place, they usually convince themselves that it's justified by some good that appears to come out of it. Getting an "A" by cheating, saving money by shoplifting or experiencing physical pleasure by acting promiscuously seem to produce quick benefits—at least in the short term.

Other times people rationalize that sin isn't so evil after all. If everyone uses foul language, for example, is it really that bad? Or, they may decide that

Not surprisingly, teens' consciences—and likelihood of feeling moral guilt—are usually strongest in areas where they have experience. "It is within experience that learned moral principles are tested and adopted into one's personal conscience," explains religious studies professor Christine Gudorf at Florida International University. "Most teens have more experience around issues of truth telling, promise keeping, respect for others and fidelity—the central moral issues in interpersonal relationships."

So, even if it's tough, examine your conscience carefully. If you're uncertain about something, Allik recommends talking with trusted persons whose moral standards you respect. In any case, be honest with yourself. If you have indeed sinned, don't just rationalize your acts and omissions all over again.

became the Church's leader (Mark 14:66-72; John 21:15-19). Likewise, repentance can help you become a better person.

Repentance isn't a negative concept. Rather, it signals a return to God. It reveals your sorrow for having sinned, plus your sincere desire to do better in the future. God's grace can help you take these steps.

As Catholics, we're not left wondering whether God will act on a whim and forgive us. Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation as an outward sign to assure us of God's grace and forgiveness (John 20:19-23). By confessing our sins, expressing sorrow, committing to do better and accepting penance, we are reconciled to Christ.

Stressing Christ's active role in the sacraments, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes Jesus' role in Reconciliation as "the physician

place?" asks Sister Dawn Notwehr. Sister Dawn teaches theology and morality at Quincy University in Illinois.

Setting Things Right

Dealing with moral guilt also requires, in many cases, taking steps to repair relationships with people you've hurt. "If you're in a group, the group has certain expectations and certain rules," explains Sister Dawn. After people break the trust that binds the community, "there's a need to somehow heal and restore."

Teens who talked disrespectfully to their parents, for example, should apologize and try to establish better relationships at home. Teens who stole property should generally return the property or pay for it.

Setting things right can seem costly in the short run. Craig's parents may well ground him if Craig admits lying about Brett's party. Katelyn, a student at Craig's school, may get a failing grade or detention if she later owns up to cheating on a pop quiz.

These actions, however, can help restore your sense of self-worth and help you put guilt behind you. Moreover, such actions give the home or school community a chance to rebuild bonds with each teen. "If we are honest and step forward," says Sister Dawn, "then the community is obligated to support us."

Asking forgiveness helps, too. Forgiveness is not approval or acceptance of sin. Rather it enables the person who was hurt to move beyond the injury. At the same time, it helps those who repented to move forward.

Unfortunately, things can't always be corrected. A teen who killed someone during a mugging cannot undo the homi-

Q. Some sins seem too embarrassing to confess, even though you're really sorry. What to do? **A.** *I'm embarrassed by all my sins, so I'm really glad the priest's role is to represent the forgiving Christ. As a priest prepares for ordination, he is helped to become a good listener and a compassionate person. You never need to go into all the details of your sinfulness. Just stick to the facts. The priest is more interested in your return to God and your desire to turn away from sin. Also, you can choose the confessional screen to protect your privacy rather than sitting so that the confessor can see you. That may help.*

they know better than the Church about whether drugs, illegal drinking or premarital sex are right for them. (Read about Eve's experiences in Genesis 3:1-7.)

Once we've sinned, that's not the end of it. We have to live with our consciences. Conscience is our inner sense of right and wrong. The more pure teens are, the more developed their consciences will be. Having an awakened conscience certainly beats being an immature, selfish sinner.

Time to Repent

However bad a sinful act or omission was, you can do something about it. You can repent.

"Though your sins be like scarlet," Isaiah said, "they may become white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). Banishing guilt ghosts isn't easy, but God can do anything. After Peter denied Christ three times, he repented and

tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them" (#1484). Sin wounded God's honor and love and our own dignity (#1487). Through the priest's absolution, the sacrament conveys Christ's assurance, "Child, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). As the sacrament returns us to God's love, his mercy restores our dignity.

When we feel most vulnerable because of guilt, Reconciliation offers healing, hope and goodness. "If we really don't like what we're doing and we want to change, what better

cide. A teen who had an abortion cannot bring her baby back to life. And a teen may have hurt someone so badly that that person refuses to forgive.

Nonetheless, these teens can still make any possible apologies. They may also find comfort in doing some other action to address their sin. Where the sin was a crime, for example, they will serve the

criminal sentence a court might impose. Or, if the person they hurt refuses to forgive them, they might do acts of kindness for others in similar situations.

Teens who are unsure what to do in any situation should ask the priest during the Sacrament of Reconciliation. "I

would say you'd want to talk to the confessor certainly," says Gallagher, "and where appropriate seek restitution or atonement."

Failing to seek forgiveness, Judas hung himself after betraying Christ (Matthew 27:3-9). Unchecked guilt can likewise destroy you through severe depression and other psychological problems.

Letting Go

Obviously, it's best not to sin in the first place. Planning can often help you avoid situations likely to

involve moral jeopardy. For example, accept a rule that dates won't visit at the house unless a parent is home. Or make alternative plans if a party proves to include drinking or drugs. If you do sin, however, listen to your guilty conscience and act on it.

"Be realistic," advises Allik. "We are human beings. We make mistakes. We are imperfect." God loves you despite your flaws. If God can accept you as an imperfect person, then you can learn to accept yourself as well.

As Paul wrote, "God delivered all to disobedience that he might have mercy upon all" (Romans 11:32). When you feel moral guilt gnawing at you, accept God's grace. Repent and resolve to do better in the future. Learn from the experience and remember that change is possible.

The Sacrament of

q. Apologies can be so clumsy. Can you give some advice on how to judge if an actual apology would be best—or if just giving the other person time to heal is a better idea?

a. In almost all cases, I vote for the actual apology. A simple "I'm sorry" is probably the least clumsy apology. Say it as soon as possible. If the other person stays upset, then you can try to talk more later. But those two words can help speed the healing process.

Reconciliation, in particular, releases guilt and empowers us to move forward. "You can really liberate the conscience through this experience," says Gallagher, "and allow yourself to move on from that point."

When you step out of the shower, you don't keep worrying about whether dirt and sweat are gone. Rather, you feel clean and refreshed. In a similar sense, repentance blots away our guilt and cleanses us of sin (see Psalm 51). It lets us let go of guilt and renew relationships with God and the community.

The choice is yours. Feel guilty? Then deal with it! **YU**

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Don't Take That Guilt Trip!

"What kind of friend are you if you won't give me a ride when I need it?"

"YOU'RE LATE AGAIN. NOW THE WHOLE DAY IS RUINED!"

"If you cared about me, you wouldn't spend so much time with your friends."

Sound familiar? Because guilt is a powerful emotion, people may use false guilt to manipulate you into doing what they want. The resulting guilt trips can take you all the way from minor inconveniences to a major loss of self-esteem.

What can you do? Start with some preparation. Do certain situations make you feel guilty? Are they rooted in a moral wrong? Or are they instead based on your sense of what ought to happen in a perfect world? ("I want to help my friends." "I want to please my boyfriend/girlfriend.")

- **Accept that neither you nor the world are perfect.** ("I can't make everyone happy. I sometimes make mistakes.")
- **Recognize that you have a right to pursue your own wants and needs.** ("I don't want to give up seeing my friends." or "Sometimes it's too inconvenient to drive an extra 30 minutes each way to give somebody a ride.")
- **Prepare.** When someone tries to send you on a guilt trip, don't cave in. Practice remaining at peace when people try to manipulate you. Listen to the request or comment. Consider what's said and respond calmly. If that's too hard, say, "I'll get back to you later on that."
- **Take responsibility when appropriate.** If you were 10 minutes late, then apologize. But refuse to accept blame for ruining the whole day. That's unreasonable!
- **Assert yourself.** Respond to any request politely, but forcefully. ("Sorry, but I can't give you a ride tomorrow." "I've already made plans for Friday night, so I won't be going out with you then.") Stick by your decision, despite any cajoling or blaming. You don't need to justify yourself to friends or classmates.
- **Reject manipulation.** If a date insists that you'd have sexual relations if you really loved him or her, loud warning bells should sound in your mind. Anyone who really cares about you will respect your Christian morals.

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