

Toward an Understanding of Guilt among Adolescent Males and Females

During the school year 1977-1978, I asked some of the Second Year College Students of Santo Tomas University, age seventeen and eighteen, to list the five things that make them feel most guilty. I tested two classes of each college — about one thousand two hundred students. The following are some of things they feel most guilty about:

Disobeying authority — especially to parents: “disobeying my parents,” “when my parents scold me,” “spending too much money when I know my parents are working hard for me to come to school and I don’t do my part,” etc.

Inappropriate Sexual Behavior: “entertaining bad thoughts,” “reading dirty magazines,” “watching bold movies,” “some thoughts about sex,” “evil thoughts,” “lustful looks at women,” “sexual acts,” “premarital sex,” “making love,” “the sexual urge,” “masturbation” (mentioned frequently), “expression of self through sex,” “sex weakness,” “sexual insecurity,” “going with a lesbian,” “having sexual desires,” etc.

Religious duties and behavior: “not attending Sunday Mass,” “not fulfilling Sunday obligations,” “not confessing my sins,” “doing the same things after confession,” “denying my faults when I know they are true,” etc.

Awareness of not giving one’s best to achieve one’s aspirations in life: “knowing that my parents work hard for me to come

to school and I don't do my best," "missing my classes without valid reason," "not paying attention to teachers and not preparing my lessons because of indifference," preferring pleasure to duty," "not knowing what I'm going to be in life," "not knowing what I ought to do," "knowing Jesus was knocking at my heart, yet I remained unawakened and never listened to him," etc.

Self-Centeredness: "thinking about myself," "selfishness," "egoism," "when I do not share with others," etc.

Altruism: "not helping others in need," "when I do things without love," "when I do work without love," "hurting the feelings of others," "doing harm to others," "hurting anybody by words or actions," etc.

Honesty: "not admitting my fault when I know it is true," "not keeping my promises," "telling lies," "dishonesty," etc.

Based on these previous answers I devised an open-ended questionnaire to measure the intensity of their guilt when they violated standards of conduct, the sources of their values, and how they deal with their guilt feelings. Samples of the many questions the students were asked are:

- Disobeying my parents — makes me feel
- Not attending Sunday Masses through my own personal decision — makes me feel
- Cheating in examinations, if I do not get caught and scolded — makes me feel
- Reading "bold" (pornographic) magazines and going to "bold" movies — makes me feel
- Satisfying my sexual needs through masturbation — makes me or would make me feel
- Being selfish and thinking only about myself — makes me feel
- Doing what I think is wrong — makes me feel

They could answer these and many other questions with the following choices: not guilty, rarely guilty, considerably guilty, and very guilty.

To find out about the sources of their values or how did they know about what is right and what is wrong, they were asked to

rank by order of importance (on the scale of 1-5) the following sources: a) from my parents; b) from my church; c) from my Filipino culture; d) I learned it myself; e) from my teachers in school.

To find out how they dealt with their guilt feelings — the following alternatives were given:

- I try to escape from guilt feelings by going to shows, by getting involved with sports, and by busying myself with other things.
- When I have guilt feelings I discuss them with my parents.
- When I have guilt feelings I discuss with my friends.
- When I have guilt feelings I discuss with my brothers and sisters.
- When I have guilt feelings I keep them to myself and bear with them.
- When I have guilt feelings I go to confession to a priest.
- When I have guilt feelings I ask God to forgive me and then I feel relieved of my guilt.

They could answer these alternatives with the following choices: always, often, sometimes, not at all.

At the end of the questionnaire they were asked to state in their words what they thought to be the main cause of their guilt. The following are some of their answers:

“The main cause of my guilt is that God is not in my life.”
(Male)

“That I’m not serious about my life.” (Female)

“When I commit a sin and I know that is a sin.” (Female)

“Because of a broken home and lack of parental care.”
(Female)

“Knowing that I have been inconsiderate and unfair to someone.” (Female)

“Because I act erroneously due to the strong urges present in me which I cannot resist even though I know they are wrong.”
(Male)

"My vices convince me I am really good for nothing. I try to ignore them but I know they are wrong." (Male)

"The main cause of my guilt is that I do wrong actions. Then, I'm really bothered by my conscience. The only thing I know which can relieve me is prayer and confession." (Male)

"When I know what I'm doing is wrong and still keep doing it. When I do something wrong to someone and he does not get angry at me, and still loves me and respects me." (Female)

"The main cause of my guilt is going against the standards of conduct imposed by the State, my parents, and God." (Male)

"The main cause of my guilt is the violation of the laws of God. I feel guilty when I forget my prayers. I feel guilty when I miss Sunday Mass. I feel guilty when I disobey my parents because I know that what they do is for my own good, even when they correct me is not to make feel sad or disappointed." (Female)

"The main cause of my guilt is that I know that through my bad actions and sins committed I displease God very much." (Female)

"Denying the faults that I know are true—knowing that I'm not true to myself. After I have confessed and have made a promised to God of not falling again into the same sins but failed because of carelessness, then I feel very guilty." (Female)

"My lack of communication with God due to my sinful way of living. Other times guilt comes from social pressure. I usually keep guilty feelings inside me and try to talk it over with God. Sometimes I seek professional help, like: priests, parents, teachers and, sometimes, friends." (Male)

"Personal desires or urges or friends easily influence me and sometimes I disobey conscience." (Male)

"I do things without bothering to ask myself if the things I'm doing would build or destroy; in other words, I do them because I like them, without considering the consequences." (Female)

"I thank UST (this Catholic University) for introducing Theology, especially Moral Theology in our curriculum because now I always think of an act before performing it, even the little simple things I do." (Female)

"The main cause of my guilt is my conscience." (Male)

"Intentionally doing what I think is wrong is the main cause of my guilt." (Male)

"I think the main cause of my guilt is that I'm really bothered by my conscience when I do something wrong. Guilt really makes me feel restless and uncomfortable and I only get peace of mind when I ask God to forgive me and make some reparation for it." (Female)

"When I did something wrong, which beforehand I knew was wrong, and yet I did it. I feel guilty because of the consequences I have to face. Sometimes I feel more guilty when the person to whom I have done something wrong does not find out about it." (Female)

"Because I let my passions blind me, that is, I know an action is wrong but I do not stop doing it, but after doing it I promise not to do it again, however when a circumstance comes, then, I do it all over again... I cannot stop doing it; other actions I can control..." (Female)

"I know an action is wrong, yet I still yield to it due to my own whims and caprice. When I have guilty feelings I don't know what to do, I try to escape from such feelings, but those feelings still persist inside me." (Female)

"My conscience tells me the things I do are wrong. It is God talking to me through my conscience, and it is then that feelings of guilt arise." (Female)

"My personal faults (deeds, words, thoughts). I do wrong even when I know it is wrong. Going with the wrong group from which I learned many evil things. I'm guilty because I do not confess my sins." (Male)

"By doing the things I do not want to do, but still do." (Male)

"When I do something wrong I feel guilty, I have the knowledge that it is wrong but I commit it anyhow." (Male)

"Selfishness and self-concern because I do everything to satisfy my needs, even if it hurts or destroys." (Female)

Many of the students state that the main cause of their guilt is their *conscience*, or intentionally doing what they consider wrong. But how intensive is their guilt? Do they feel considerably guilty or very guilty?

In this article, I do not endeavor to measure the intensity of their guilt — a difficult and maybe unsuccessful task. I will leave this point for the psychologists. My main concern is the moral point of view, i. e., are the consciences of those students crying guilty enlightened with genuine, valid principles of morality? After checking the questionnaire and reading their comments on the main cause of their guilt and the sources of their values, one is led to conclude that many feel guilty because they do not know what they can and ought to know. They could be spared of much guilt if they had a better knowledge of genuine morality, or if their consciences were better trained. Guilt, conscience, and sin are inextricably bound up. One needs to understand these concepts to be able to appreciate what goes on in the human soul, when afflicted with the burden of guilt. This is the main concern of this article, and we hope that by understanding and imparting them to our students we will not only prevent, but also relieve them from the burden of unnecessary guilt.

THE CONCEPT OF GUILT

The Webster's Dictionary defines guilt as "the state of one who has committed an offense especially consciously; a feeling of culpability; self-reproach often manifest in marked preoccupation with moral correctness of one's behavior; the state of being liable to penalty for an offense against the law."

According to Existential Psychologists guilt is a fundamental characteristic of "dasein" or human existence. Man never quite transcends his guilt which consists in his failing to carry out the mandate to fulfill his possibilities. Man never quite

succeeds in becoming what he ought to be. Medard Boss, in *Psychoanalysis and Daseinsanalysis* speaks of this fundamental condition of being human:

... man is primarily guilty. His primary guilt starts at birth. For it is then that he begins to be in debt to his Dasein... Throughout life, man remains guilty in this sense, i.e., indebted to all the requests that his future has in store for him until he breaths his last... Man's existential guilt consists in his failing to carry out the mandate to fulfill all his possibilities.¹

Examples of this primary and inescapable guilt abound in literature and in psychological case studies. Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, tried to exonerate himself to no avail, and finally went willingly to his death as his ultimate exoneration or escape. Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych also found in death the answer to an unfulfilled guilty life. Binswagner's patient, Ellen West, began also to live relatively free of existential guilt when she had seriously resolved to end her life.

Some psychotherapists aim to wipe out guilt feelings and treat them as a symptom of mental ill-health. They often blame religion of increasing the morbid guilt feelings of many people.

It is quite true that exaggerated guilt feelings are often connected with neurosis, and that unenlightened religion often brought about morbid guilt feelings in its adherents. It is also quite understandable that Freud, specializing in sexual phenomena, should treat guilt feelings as unhealthy, due to the fact the nineteenth century had attached a tremendous amount of morbid guilt to sexuality.² It is also highly desirable that psychotherapists and counselors should unite in the endeavor to free people from morbid guilt feelings, but guilt feelings can never be wiped away entirely, nor would it be desirable to do so. There is an element of guilt which is compatible and even necessary for the growth and development of a well integrated personality.

Guilt is not to be defined so much in negative as in positive terms. Guilt is a positive and constructive emotion. Guilt is a perception of the difference between what a thing is and what it ought to be. Everyone experiences guilt in an almost infinite number of ways and for an almost infinite number of things.

When one passes a crippled beggar in the streets, or a drunken man in the gutter, or by negligence or a conscious deed that does harm to another person, or for example when one is aware of war and hunger going on in another country, etc. In all these instances an individual experiences guilt feelings. Whenever he has a feeling of "ought", i.e., a sense of discrepancy between what he is and what he ought to be, or what he does and what he ought to do, or what the situation is and what it ought to be, he will experience guilt.

Philosophers and theologians have wrestled through the ages with the problem of guilt inherent in the depths of man's being. Some have concluded that its source lies in the gap between perfection and man's imperfect state, i.e., man can never paint a perfect picture or write a perfect poem, etc., he falls short of his ideal because he is fated to an existence in the human realm where everything is imperfect.

Theologians hold normally that guilt arises from man's moral self-consciousness as in the biblical story in which Adam ate of the "tree of good and evil", signifying the birth of his capacity to perceive the difference between right and wrong, and his beginning to feel guilty for doing the wrong.

Therefore, some guilt feelings far from being morbid for which one ought to be ashamed, are actually a proof of our great possibilities and destiny. Man should rejoice in his capacity to feel guilty for it means that a "spark disturbs our clod". More highly developed personalities feel this sense of guilt more keenly than the average human being, and utilize it in their further development.³

TYPES OF GUILT

Pathological guilt. Pathological guilt is the concern of medical healing and is the kind of guilt of those who suffer from psychosomatic disorders, specially those who suffer from such affective psychoses, as manic-depressive, psychotic depressive, and involutional melancholia, and the kind of guilt coming from what is called a "scrupulous conscience".

The subject of scruples generally is a delicate one. There may be a trial allowed by God to very sensitive souls, sensitive

not to themselves but to the purity and beauty of God. To such souls the tiniest shadow on the light of a soul created to reflect and radiate God is grief hardly to be endured. Outside these exceptional cases the sufferer of scruples is really pathological and requires the help of a doctor. An example of this kind of scruple is the person who is frequently tormented by a fantastic, trivial scruple, which is not a sin but he is at the same time blind to the fact that he habitually commits real sin (objectively speaking) of another kind, like lacking basic trust and confidence in God. For instance, it is by no means rare to find people obsessed by anxiety about involuntary suggestions of impurity, and yet completely oblivious of their sins of habitual selfishness or betrayal of confidence or mental cruelty, etc.

According to Psychoanalysis the basis of the scrupulous conscience and of the guilt resulting from it is the lack of personal integration and the "unresolved conflicts" lying in ambush in the "unconscious", for example: certain repressed tendencies, complexes, obsessions, phobias, etc.⁴

Moral Guilt. Moral guilt is the subjective awareness of having violated knowingly and willingly personal, familiar, religious or social norms. This awareness is not simply a cold, clinical knowledge but an emotional awareness that humans experience when they do knowingly and wilfully what they consider wrong, or when they do not do what they should. Moral guilt is the personal awareness of having done wrong, or the belief (possibly mistaken) that one has done wrong. Moral guilt is the consciousness of having acted against conscience, or of having sinned. When one judges based on the knowledge of real wrongdoing that wrong has been done, sin committed, then he feels morally guilty. Often the subjective awareness of guilt is due to the fact that one is mistaken in the concepts of what is right and what is wrong, or because one is not properly instructed in his faith and morals, or due to some emotional disturbance unrelated to any wrong doing, or out of proportion to the wrong done as in neurotic guilt.

CONSCIENCE AND THE SUPER-EGO

Heidegger says that conscience summons us to be ourselves calling us back from the talk of the market and the conventional

behavior of the masses. Conscience speaks to us in a mode of silence and it is a call to love. He who experiences the call of conscience, experiences at the same time guilt.⁵

For St. Thomas conscience is the application of moral science to human facticity. It has two modalities — antecedent or conscience strictly speaking which precedes the act to be performed. Equipped with moral knowledge we think of what to do. The other modality of conscience is consequent — through it we examine the things which already have been done, and we consider whether they are right or wrong. With consequent conscience we reduce facts to moral principles. Thus conscience approves if our behavior is in conformity with sound principles, and conscience pronounces the verdict of guilty if our behavior has deviated from these principles.⁶

Too frequently, conscience is viewed as the internalization of a repressive external authority, such as the positive laws, or as the voice which says: Behave! This authoritarian conscience, similar in nature to Freud's Super-ego, is a misconception of conscience.⁷

The primary phenomenon of conscience is not an encounter with the authority of others but with Being. This encounter involves one's whole being. The effect of this encounter is always liberating. The voice of conscience does not lay down rules but calls the individual *to be*. Its basic message is become what you are. Conscience calls us to be true to ourselves — true selves in the making and so turn from our pseudo-existence.⁸

If conscience is the inner call within man inviting him to himself, then conscience must be utterly *personal*. In the teachings of the Catholic Church conscience is the sanctuary where we meet God, inviolable, and must lead us from within. (GS., 16-17)

An enlightened and mature conscience knows how to hear God's voice speaking to us in the living Gospel, in everything Christ (our model) Himself was and did, and to the Holy Spirit inspiring us from within and speaking to through the Church's Magisterium, and to God, the Creator, speaking to us through Nature, the natural laws, and the signs of the times in our unique personal situation.

Primarily, human conscience is a quest for truth. Human conscience exists in us as a disposition which needs to be developed and educated. Man has a never ending task of educating his conscience and he never quite succeeds in this task. In the dilemma of being and doing one is not always sure whether his conscience is right and another's conscience which tells his something difference is wrong. Not that there is not truth; there is truth, and only one truth. But nobody can be absolutely sure it is he who has arrived at the full truth in every thing.

Moral education — the internalization of moral values — is an active developmental process. There is always an essential connection between the cognitive and the moral development. For example, during the first years of life, the child is completely helpless and totally depended — he needs warmth, love and security in order to develop confidence and a basic trust in reality. Gradually, the child begins to use the cognitive functions and to be active in the internalization of moral values.

There is no end to knowing. The human intellect is selfless openness and unlimited appetite. When man is born he is “*tanquam tabula rasa*” (Aristotle), and gradually he begins to discover some truth, but never the whole truth. Human perfection is still in the future and man is separated from his completion — his fullest achievement. Man is a potential being (being in gestation) on the way to a full completion or perfection.⁹ Man is a being in the form of having to be what he can be.

The human individual is an *open possibility*, incomplete and incompletionable. Hence he is always *more* and *other* than what he has brought to the realization of himself. The individual as a whole never becomes an object which can be fully known. Human life cannot be systematized. Whatever the complex unity in which we think we have caught the individual, he himself always escapes us. All the knowledge of the individual has its own particular aspect; it always demonstrates *one* reality but no *the* reality of man. It is knowledge in suspense and not final. The individual is always *more than he knows* or can know himself to be or than anybody else knows him to be.¹⁰

Man is not wholly comprehended; therefore it is not possible to make a final judgment upon him. Man is constantly making,

re-making, or re-inventing himself, but he is always eternally incomplete, always with the capacity to be and to know more about himself. The truth is inexhaustible and our search for it must be humble and a never ending task. Truly with the help of the modern sciences the nature of man is more clearly revealed (GS., 44), but in his deepest core man still remains unknown, unspeakable, and we must continue to search the unsearchable depths of his soul. (PO., 11, footnote 140).

Dealing with moral education the Catholic Church states clearly that children and young people have the right to be encouraged to weigh moral values with an upright conscience, and to embrace them by personal choice, and to know and love God more adequately. (GE., 1) Are we as professors and counselors motivating people in this direction, or are we still purporting a pre-rational, customary, semi-superstitious morality, instead of an authentic, personalistic, interiorized morality? Are we helping the individual to mature by getting rid of his "unconscious conscience" by helping him to develop a free, personal, inviolable conscience, reaching back into the mysterious sources of our being, the sanctuary where we meet God, yet always in need of being better educated and never quite succeeding in this task?

This kind of conscience implies more than the opinions of one's parents, more than the hereditary and transmitted cultural patrimonium, more than Freud's Super-ego.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory, like most theories of behavior, leaves much to be desired by way of scientific proof, nonetheless Freud does make penetrating observations on the complex human being, his behavior, conscience, and guilt. Freud, being an original thinker, uses the words Super-ego and conscience which have similarities and dissimilarities with conscience in the Christian context.

The Super-ego is the person's moral code. It begins to develop in the child at the ages of three and four as a means of partially solving the conflict in orienting himself to the parents. The Super-ego develops as the child begins to assimilate the parents' standards regarding what is good and evil, virtuous and sinful. The internalization of parental authority enables the child to control his behavior in line with the parent's wishes and by doing so, to secure approval and reward.

Freud's Super-ego is made up of two sub-systems: the ego-ideal and the conscience. The *ego-ideal* corresponds to the child's conceptions of what the parents consider morally good. The parents convey their standards to the child by rewarding him for conduct which is in line with these standards. For example, if the child is constantly rewarded for being neat and tidy, then neatness is apt to become one of the child's ideals. *Conscience*, in the Freudian concept, corresponds only to the child's conceptions of what the parents consider morally bad, established through the experience of punishment. For instance, if the child has been frequently punished for being dirty, then dirtiness is considered to be something bad. For Freud, conscience and ego-ideal are opposite sides of the same moral code.

In addition to parents and other agents of society, teachers, ministers, policemen — in fact anyone in authority — may function in the role of the parents. The child's Super-ego does not necessarily reflect the parents' conduct or the conduct of those in authority, for they often say one thing and do another, but rather the parents' and other law-enforcers' Super-egos.

The Super-ego is the source of moral anxiety. The conscience as the internalized agent of parental authority threatens to punish the person for doing or thinking something which transgresses the perfectionistic aims of the ego-ideal laid down by the parents. Moral anxiety is experienced as feelings of guilt and shame.¹¹

TOWARDS AN EVALUATION OF GUILT

It is normal to experience guilt. A guiltless person would be horrible. One of the ironies of life, according to Freud, is that a virtuous person experiences more shame and guilt than an unvirtuous one. The very fact of thinking to do something bad or wrong makes a virtuous person feel guilty and ashamed. A less virtuous person does not have a strong super-ego, therefore, he is less likely to feel conscience-stricken when he thinks or does something that is alien to the moral code. Also a person who exercises great self-control is bound to give a good deal of thought to instinctual temptations since he does not find other outlets for his instinctual urges. Failure to keep these urges in line with reason will bring about guilt feelings.

Judging from the survey of the students, it is quite clear than those with more strict religious convictions feel considerably more guilty than those with less strict religious convictions. Also many of them, many times, seem to experience rational (moral) guilt when they do something they consider wrong, based on the knowledge of real wrong doing, for which they are responsible. Other times, their guilt is due to their mistaken concepts of what is morally right or wrong, or because they are not properly instructed in their faith and morals.

If one were to judge the quotations of the above students according to *Kohlberg's Six Stages*, one could easily see that they have moved away from the *pre-conventional level* (pre-moral level of conscience). In this stage there is no consideration of personal motivation or intention. Morality (the goodness or badness of an action) is determined by the physical consequences or by the fear of authority or to avoid punishment. In this stage guilt is experienced as a fear of punishment. When the child disobeys, he experiences guilt feelings, not because of the appreciation of any wrongness of the action, but because of the fear of rejection. Good behavior brings approval and love; bad behavior brings feelings of rejection and guilt. At this stage the child is still dominated by the super-ego. People who experienced an insecure childhood, who lacked a sense of basic trust, whose parents were themselves insecure, rigid, overbearing, or perfectionists are more predisposed to inordinate and often neurotic guilt feelings, and their moral guilt is further compounded when their experience of religion is one of rigid conformity to rules, and God is pictured in terms of threat and punishment.

Many other quotations reflect a moral conscience of a *conventional level* (Kohlberg's stages three and four). In these stages good behavior is judged by good intentions and by a conventional role conformity, where one tries to please others and to be accepted by them. In this conventional stage the motivation is still self-centered — one is concerned with winning the approval of others. The will of the group is very conditioning. For instance, some of the students surveyed remarked "I'm easily influenced by my friends," or "I'm going with the wrong group from which I learn many wrong things," etc., (stage four). Other students say that they feel guilty for not doing their duty, or for disobey-

ing rules as, for example, "I feel guilty of not fulfilling my Sunday obligations," "of not preparing my lessons," "of disobeying my parents and teachers," etc. In this stage, moral obligation is equated with duty to social and religious authorities. Many of the surveyed students are still in this conventional level and their consciences have not yet outgrown the pressures of the super-ego. They still analyze moral behavior in terms of isolated acts and worry about where they stand before God and are very much afraid God will punish them for some forgotten sin. Their guilt is often imaginary and yet very real — in the sense that many of them suffer from inner alienation, general disharmony within themselves, and often torment themselves with inordinate fears.

Some other students seem to be moving toward a more independent moral judgment based on self-accepted moral principles (stages five and six). In these stages one can be obedient to law and respect authority, but one is more concerned with the values behind the law. In these stages guilt is experienced as having violated one's set of subjectively interiorized valid principles. Good behavior is described in terms of general principles not only agreed upon by society, but also freely chosen by the person, or in terms of a personal conscience which is in accord with self-accepted ethical principles that apply to all everywhere. In these stages, one may recognize the presence of the super-ego but one is not dominated by it. One may recognize law and authority, but his life is governed more by freely chosen values, like respect for persons, truth, loyalty, love of God, etc. In these stages one is more concerned about his basic attitudes and the over all pattern of his life (the fundamental option) than isolated bits of behavior, though one is not to be careless about individual actions. In these stages one sees God as a loving Father interested in one's growth and happiness, rather than as a hard taskmaster, or someone "up-there" intended in catching us doing wrong and measuring our guilt.

Persons who have reached this level of moral maturity know their own limitations and their weaknesses. They are constantly open to new information, new insights, and want to grow in sensitivity and willingness to do good. They are ready to dialogue with others and be corrected by them. Their life is not tied to a rigid set of laws, but they are flexible, aware that growth is a

slow process, that things take time. Though conscious of the danger of complacency and mediocrity, they do not get into panic over an occasional lapse as long as they are doing their best. They know that God listens to sentences rather than to isolated syllables.

Moral education aims at helping the individual move from stage to stage, to reach eventually this level of maturity (stage six) in which one takes the whole field of human, social and religious development. Moral education aims to help the individual to develop the level of maturity in which he would say: I do this because I made a decision of conscience grounded in genuine, self-accepted principles which apply to all. I considered other alternatives and made this decision in spite of civil disobedience, or of risking my life for these convictions or principles.

Other than the level of maturity of the individual, to be able to understand the problem of guilt one must keep in mind the distinction between pathological and moral guilt. Pathological guilt is the object of medical healing. Moral guilt is the object of priestly help. There must be cooperation, interdependence, and mutual referral between psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and ministers in the handling of guilt, but the minister does not become a physician, neither the physician becomes a minister. A psychiatrist may have much to tell us about neurotic guilt, and if guilt feelings are a symptom of a personality disorder one may get help from a psychiatrist or a counselor, but if one's guilt is real, i. e., if it comes from a real sin, then no amount of counseling, or psychiatry is of any help. What is needed in this case is repentance, conversion, atonement — the help of a priest.

Carl Jung states clearly that many people who go to psychiatrists burdened with the problem of guilt should go to religious ministers instead. It is the priest, or the clergyman, rather than the doctor, who should be most concerned with this problem. Unfortunately, Jung affirms, many of the priests lack the special knowledge which would enable them to discern the psychic factors of the disease, and one can hardly expect the doctor to have anything to say about the ultimate things of the soul, about faith, hope, love, and about what is wrong and right. It is from the clergyman, not from the doctor, that the sufferer of guilt should expect such help.¹²

Karl Menninger, another psychiatrist, in *Whatever Became of Sin*, declares also that ministers have an unparalleled opportunity to lighten the burdens of the people and to prevent the development of chronic anxiety, guilt, and depression. Menninger laments the disappearance of the word sin and after making a diagnosis from what goes on in today's world he believes the word sin ought to be brought back:

... One misses any mention of "sin", a word which used to be a veritable and watchword of prophets. It was a word once in everybody's mind, but now rarely heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles — sin with "I" in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty perhaps of a sin that could be repented and repaired or atoned for? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick or criminal — or asleep? Wrong things are being done, we know; tares are being sown in the wheat field at night. But is no one responsible, no one answerable for these acts? Anxiety and depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sins? Where, indeed, did sin go? What became of it?¹³

Norman Vincent Peale, in the *Power of Positive Thinking*, reports the testimony of a physician who encountered a good number of cases of nervous breakdown because of guilt. These patients attributed their breakdown not to the sense of guilt, but to their overworked condition. But the physician said: "These men need not have broken down from overwork if first the sense of guilt had been fully released."¹⁴

The well-educated priest ought to be able to discover the real cause of guilt. Is it the *unconscious* with its many unresolved conflicts, or a faulty Super-ego with a "thousand several tongues... crying all guilty, guilty" (Shakespeare), or is it a well-educated conscience crying guilty on account of our personal sins?

The minister's attitude towards those burdened with the problem of moral guilt should be understanding, never condemnatory: "Sit not in judgment because you condemn yourself." (Rom. 2:1; Mt. 7:1) The words of Jung on this point are also very revealing:

Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses. I am the oppressor of the person I condemn, not his friend or fellow sufferer. I do not in the least mean to say that we must not pass judgment in the cases of persons whom we desire to help and improve. But if the doctor wishes to help any human being he must be able to accept him as he is. And he can do this in reality only when he has already seen and accepted himself as he is.¹⁵

CONSCIENCE CRYING GUILTY ON ACCOUNT OF SIN

In the past, moral theologians used to distinguish light and mortal guilt resulting from venial and mortal sin respectively. For a mortal sin they required: "full advertance", "full consent", and "serious matter", conditions which more enlightened theologians consider very problematic.

Full advertance: Is it not an illusion to think that all in humans come to clarity? Aren't we humans, in our deeper region, in our unconscious unknown even to ourselves? Aren't we groping, searching in many ways and in relation to so many things? Isn't man undefinable, incomplete, and incompletable, and his knowledge always limited and in suspense?

Full consent: Are we humans free enough to say yes or no in the traditional sense moral theologians attach to these words? Is it not true that "man is born free and everywhere in chains"? (Rousseau). One hears so often the phrase "where there is a will, there is a way", and yet experience teaches us that often there is a will, but there is no way. To what extent people, who violate standards of conduct, are subjectively responsible is many a time very problematic. Are those who offend standards of human conduct always free-sinful-guilty, or maybe not well, sick and immature? These questions are not always clear.

Serious matter: the third condition for mortal sin according to traditional morals is serious matter. The commandments were and are serious but in the past all commandments except the sixth admitted parvity of matter. Theologians of the past considered all voluntary violations of the sixth commandment *mortal*, which again due to the new insights from Psychology, and a better understanding of human sexuality, seems very problematic. Don't we have to judge the sexual sins like all the other sins? If the

most important commandment is the law of love of God and the neighbor, and if there is parity of matter in sins of love, justice, etc., why not in matters of sexuality?

Masturbation is a common phenomenon among teenagers. In the classes I tested is frequently mentioned as one of the things that makes them feel most guilty. This is the reason why I devote especial attention to this problem.

One does not have to go along with those who say that there is nothing wrong with masturbation, but to presume that every act of masturbation is mortally sinful is to incur also in an exaggerated rigorism.

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education dealing with the problem of masturbation gives the following advice:

One of the causes of masturbation is sexual imbalance. The other causes are generally of an occasional and secondary nature... In education, efforts should be directed rather towards the causes than to attacking the problem directly. Only in this way can one promote the effective development of boyish instincts — which means an interior growing up towards domination of instinct... Fear, threats, physical or spiritual intimidation are best avoided. These could encourage the formation of obsessions and compromise the possibility of a balanced sexual attitude, making turn further on himself instead of opening himself to others. Success as always will depend on the degree of awareness of the real causes of the problem. This is what formation needs to be particularly concerned with.

... In trying to meet each difficulty, it is better not to offer a ready-made solution, take-it or leave-it solution. Rather using the occasion for real interior growth, help and encourage the sufferer in such a way that he finds his own remedy.¹⁶

To be able to understand the morality of the complex phenomenon of masturbation the subjective factor why one masturbates is most important. We cannot generalize about the significance of masturbation in any individual life. Every case must be handled on its own merits. However, one ought not to presume easily grave subjective guilt. On the contrary, more often than

not, subjective guilt is lacking, especially in the adolescent and in all those who have not succeeded in integrating their sexuality.

In the past, the sexual, psychological and moral significance of masturbation has been grossly exaggerated. Such distortion has served only to augment morbid guilt feelings and increase the likelihood of masturbation becoming a problem in the lives of many adolescents. We would do much better if we help the adolescent discover the cause of which masturbation is but a symptom. In this context the recent book on *Human Sexuality* by the Catholic Theological Society of America has shown a better approach to the problem of masturbation helping the individual to rationally and freely integrate sexuality in its total personality. The following is an excerpt from the pastoral reflections:

... A single act even of willful masturbation seldom achieves that substantial deordination in matter of great importance, which is generally considered to constitute the serious moral malice of masturbation. Such substantial deordination requires consistent, deliberate, self-centered pursuit of pleasure, which refuses to acknowledge or respond to one's relational responsibility towards others. Persons who occasionally masturbate must not, therefore, be automatically judged as being in the state of mortal sin.

Persons seriously struggling with the task of integrating their sexuality, especially adolescents, should be encouraged to receive the Eucharist at every opportunity even though occasional incidents of masturbation may occur. The presumption should be that such persons have not sinned gravely and consequently have not lost their rights to receive the sacraments...

Little benefit appears to be gained from focusing directly on the masturbatory behavior. Highlighting the malice of each act of masturbation only serves to compound the problem and drive the person further into self. For this reason, directing the counselee to activities that are other-centered appears to be the most effective remedy for treating adolescent masturbation. Immediate confession after each act of masturbation ought not to be encouraged, though periodic discussion of one's progress in this area can prove helpful to the counselee or penitent.¹⁷

Dealing with the problem of sin and guilt is important to keep in mind that Christian life is an ongoing conversion. Humans fail normally because of human weakness, but not because of malice or evil intentions. Hence, the possibility that many of the human failures, especially sexual failures, not be "mortal" or serious faults, due to an imperfect freedom. Therefore, one ought not to feel unreasonably guilty. Reasonable or moral guilt always presupposes subjective failure or sin.

In a more updated concept of morality we emphasize fundamental options. Our life grows in terms of a multiple relationship with God, the neighbor and the world. Some of our acts deepen this relationship, some lessen it, and some break this fundamental relationship. To break this fundamental relationship with God or the neighbor or the world is to sin.

This breaking of relationship does not necessary mean hatred directed to God or the neighbor, but also that we do not do what is essential to maintain these relationships. For example, a husband may offend his wife seriously, not only by hating her, but also by being unfaithful to what is essential to her love.

Sin is a reality present in the Bible and very obvious in the world. Nevertheless, sin when applied to individuals involves more than an action or more than an external act of breaking the law or more than doing something wrong. Sin involves the existential core of the person.

Traditionally, theologians spoke of mortal sin which was going from the state of grace — a relationship of love — into hatred. This word *mortal* sounds much like fatal, incurable, deathly. In real life, we get sick more or less seriously a few times, and once fatally, and we die. A sin (a grave one) is tragedy in the soul, but it is still possible that God sees much good in our relationship with Him and His judgment is milder than our own.

Sin is often so incomprehensible. One asks: "how could I have done it?", or "I ought not to have done it." The good is comprehensible and in harmony with God. Sin is a discordant note and often obscure. Yet one cannot say that a grave sin is committed inadvertently. To commit a grave sin is never like an accident, but more like an attitude from the "heart", the source of good and evil (Mk. 7:14-23). To sin gravely is more like a

process, or a culmination of an attitude or a way of life which, under the impulses of strong passions or temptations, might lead the individual to break fundamental relationships with God or the neighbor.

A grave sin cannot be common occurrence, especially when a person is trying to live a good moral life.¹⁸ Can a person change fundamental relationships easily? Does one change fundamental relationship very often in life? Can a person love his father or mother or neighbor and hate them off and on? If a person loves and hates another off and on, would this be real love and real hatred? Would this person be mature enough to realize that he is breaking a fundamental relationship with God and the neighbor and committing a grave sin?

To commit a grave sin, subjectively speaking, one needs to have *evaluative* knowledge or knowledge of appreciation, i.e., one must realize in the depths of his soul that he offends God or the neighbor and he does it voluntarily. It could also happen that one is not aware of offending God or the neighbor because of antecedent faults or because one does not care to know. In instances like these, one is also responsible for not knowing, or for not being aware, and therefore, guilty.

The New Testament writers use the Greek noun "hamartia" and the verb "hamartanein" for sin. The word sin occurs at least sixty times in the letters of St. Paul, and it is he who has the fullest theology of sin in the New Testament. For him, sin is first and foremost a state or condition of human nature from which sinful acts come. Sin is universal, something in which every human being is involved. Man is "under sin", sin "lords it over us" like a despot, sin "takes us captive" as prisoners are taken in war. Sin is not an external power, but gets right inside us, into our every fiber, so that we become the "slaves of sin". But St. Paul also affirms our freedom to face and resist sin. We can resist and overcome sin by Christ dwelling in our hearts, by his spirit taking possession of us (Rom 8: 1-17).¹⁹

St. Paul contrasts "hamartia" — the basic power of selfishness within us — with "pneuma" — the Spirit of God dwelling within us. The fruits of those guided by the Spirit are plain to see: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, chastity and self control.

Those guided by the Spirit will not be in danger of yielding to sin or self-indulgence. On the contrary, those guided by "hamartia" or the basic power of selfishness will yield to self-indulgence and their fruits will also be obvious: fornication, sexual irresponsibility, quarrels, bad temper, envy, jealousy, etc. (Gal. 5: 13-26).

The consequence of yielding to self-indulgence results also in a hardening of the heart or in a dulling of the moral sense, so that there is less and less reluctance to sin, and thus sin begets sin.

By sinning gravely man breaks away from God and the community to live in isolation. By cutting himself off from God and the community, rather than growing and maturing, man is degrading and entangling himself into the desperate contradiction of his being. The only way out of this contradiction is for man to be honest with himself and admit his guilt, confess his sinfulness, and ask for forgiveness.

God does not approve of man's sins, but loves him in spite of his sins. In the gospel according to St. Luke, grave sin is compared to the wandering of a son from his father's house (Lk 15:18), but the son needed only to ask for forgiveness and he was immediately received back. In the Old Testament:

Our God, is a God of mercy and compassion... He is patient with us for many years... Greatly loving... He never punishes us, as our guilt and our sins deserve... (Nh 9: 39-31; Ps 103: 9-13)

If such is our God, man ought not to feel inordinately guilty when confronting his sinfulness, especially in a venial sense. Even when confronting the tragedy of a serious or grave sin God "knows what we are made of" (Ps 193: 14). Therefore, man — in the limitations and complexities of his being, in his confusion and anxiety, in his grandeur and his misery, and his sinfulness and his guilt — if he goes to God and repents, he will surely hear words of pardon and everlasting life.

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