



Sex, Truth and the Illumination of our Guilt

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Guilt has gotten a lot of bad press recently. We live in an age where guilt is practically always something bad, something to get past with the help of a shrink. Particularly when discussing sex, people will declare that religion and morality do nothing more than make people feel guilty. Andrew Aaron, a sex and marriage therapist in New Bedford, Massachusetts seems to subscribe to this view:

"Through centuries," he writes, "religious education has associated sex with what is wrong and sinful rather than what is sacred. Instead of an expression of the divine, sex is suspiciously regarded as weakness of the flesh. The result of this influence is that sexuality, a natural part of being human, is tainted with shame, guilt, and ambivalence."

Every instance of erotic satisfaction, sexual activity or orgasm, however, cannot be automatically branded as sacred or as a divine manifestation. We all recognize how easily the unbridled pursuit of sexual gratification can become an exploitative, self-centered and demeaning enterprise. "Context" matters critically when it comes to getting sex right, and it is too easy

in the sexually permissive environment of today's society to miss the core truth that the unique context for human sexual activity is a very specific one, namely, the beautiful setting of marriage, with its mutual commitment and openness to children.

Father Thomas O'Donnell, S.J. in his "Medicine and Christian Morality" distills the matter to its essence in this way:

"In the moral order, all deliberately induced venereal pleasure is restricted to marriage and related in some way, either immediately or remotely, to a proper marital act."

From this perspective, the real harms we bring upon ourselves and others when seeking to satisfy the sexual impulse outside of its specific context *should*, in fact, elicit feelings of guilt on our part.

To put it simply, there is such a thing as "good guilt," which manifests our own inner awareness of how we have acted against what is good for us, and violated the objective moral order.

I recall a story of a woman

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who committed adultery, and over time she struggled with feelings of guilt. What she ended up doing, in this situation, was to rationalize her guilt away with the help of her therapist. He managed to convince her that she was a "genius of friendship." The woman became "spiritually thinner" in her relationships with men, and ceased to grow humanly and personally. Simply put, she entered into the worst possible state of spiritual affairs.

The potential that she had for any deep relationships with members of the opposite sex was dashed by the way she resolved her guilt: men became objects for her crafty genius, and her relationships were reduced to power plays and manipulation. She gradually became an empty shell of a woman, with little left that was genuine inside of her. She had encountered real guilt in her life, but had failed to engage it in a way that could lead to growth, conversion and fulfillment, and her therapist likewise failed her, because he was not sensitive to the value of true guilt and the deepest human needs reflected in that guilt — the need to forgive and to be forgiven.

A few years back, Naomi Wolf wrote about a friend of hers who was

a "Cornell-educated, urban, Democratic-voting 40-year-old cardiologist." This friend had once had an abortion, and afterwards she said something Wolf found very interesting: "You know how in the Greek myths when you kill a relative you are pursued by Furies? For months it was as if baby Furies were pursuing me."

No matter what our education or background, no matter what our level of sophistication may be, we have all received the gift of conscience, and the gift of "good guilt" that is ordered to helping us confront ourselves and turn away from wrongdoing. Pushing away our good guilt or hiding it under the rug only makes our situation worse. We are the only creatures in the animal kingdom capable of illuminating our guilt, of asking why we feel guilty.

Guilt is like a pain of the soul, and pain often indicates that something is wrong and we should see a doctor. Our guilty feelings about wrongs or evils we have committed should lead us to seek the Divine Physician, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where God's healing touch is personally experienced. Forgiveness from God and neighbor leads us to healing and wholeness. In this sense, "good guilt" points to pos-

sibilities of inner renewal and freedom. By becoming attuned to our guilt, and addressing it honestly, we discover a real cause for hope.

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