

# Guilt and shame can lead to changing for the good

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**Q. I struggle a lot with guilt and shame. What should I do about it?**

**A.** I have to immediately praise you for identifying how you have been feeling and wanting to do something to find peace. While there are times when the experience of shame can be absolutely debilitating, guilt and shame can also be very good things.

Recently, Pope Francis pointed out how our experience of shame can reveal a profound truth about our humanity. He even called it “the virtue of shame.”

He said, “shame is a true Christian virtue, and even human

. . . the ability to be ashamed. . . . In our country, those who are never ashamed are called ‘sin vergüenza’: this means ‘the unashamed,’ because they are people who do not have the ability to be ashamed, and to be ashamed is a virtue of the humble.”

At this point, I can already hear the jokes about Catholics and guilt.

I don’t know if I can name one movie or TV show that portrays Catholics where the concept of “Catholic guilt” isn’t somehow woven into the story. My mom always says, “What is there that is ‘Catholic’ about guilt? It’s just ‘guilt!’” If I’ve done something wrong, I should feel guilty, shouldn’t I?

I mean, what would you call it if someone could do something wrong and not feel guilt or shame? We call that a behavioral disorder. We call it “being a sociopath.”

**Needed indicator**

Experiencing guilt when we have done something wrong is a sign that something is going right, not that something has gone wrong. In this sense, guilt is like feeling pain when you touch something hot; it is an indication that I should change what I am doing. But — and this is important — it is not the pain that is burning me, it is the heat. And it is not the guilt that is hurting me, it is the sin.

The desire to avoid feeling bad about doing bad is a normal thing. But it is not a good thing.

But, you aren't made for misery either. Christ came to give us life to the full. He offers a greater joy than we could find anywhere else.

So what do we do with feelings of guilt and shame? How do we move toward joy?

First, I think it might be useful to point out the distinction between “guilt” and “shame.” They are similar, but they are not the same. Therefore, how we confront them is not going to be the same, either.

I was listening to an interview with two counselors, and they offered the following definitions for understanding the differences between guilt and shame more accurately.

They said that guilt is the awareness of having violated some objective standard. For example, I know that it is wrong to lie, but then I go ahead and lie anyway. I feel guilty about this because I am aware that I have violated the standard of honesty.

Now, there is such a thing as true guilt and false guilt. False guilt is when I am holding myself to a false standard. Therefore, while an accurate standard is that I ought to be a person of prayer, there are people who feel guilty if they don't “enjoy” prayer. But that is not a true standard.

There are a couple of ways that we normally respond to guilt. We might argue with the standard and deny that a thing is really bad. We can distract ourselves from having to face our sin. Or we can admit our failure and confess our sin. We can repent.

### **Something to hide**

Shame, on the other hand, is more relational. Shame is the awareness of having failed in the eyes of another. That “other” could be another human being, God, or even myself. For this reason, the primary responses to the experience of shame are either to justify ourselves or to hide ourselves. We will either demand that the other condone our actions or that they don't look at us; we don't want to truly “be seen” by the one who knows our failure.

With shame, as with guilt, there is true shame and “toxic” shame. Shame is toxic when it does not accurately reflect reality. For example, shame is toxic if I imagine that God's vision of me is that I am simply an annoyance (or worse).

I was recently speaking to someone who kept calling herself a “freak” because of a particular wound that she struggles with. This woman certainly finds it difficult to approach the God who loves her with any degree of joy. But her shame is not based in reality. A real sin has clouded her vision of herself to the point where she believes that she is her sin.

What is the best response to shame? Well, if shame moves me to justify or hide myself, then the best response is to choose humility and come into the light of God's gaze. (Note: This does not mean going on “Jerry Springer.” That seems more like an attempt at self-justification.)

It most likely means going to confession. Pope Francis put it this way: Confession “is an encounter with Jesus . . . who waits for us just as we are. . . . [Therefore] we must have trust because when we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, ‘Jesus Christ the Righteous’ . . . who supports us before the Father and

defends us in front of our weaknesses. But you need to stand in front of the Lord 'with our truth of sinners,' 'with confidence, even with joy.'"

It is possible to step out from under guilt and shame, but it always involves being willing to tell the truth about our guilt and step into the light of God's love.

*Father Schmitz is director of youth and young adult ministry for the Diocese of Duluth, and chaplain of the Newman Center at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. Reach him at [fathermikeschmitz@gmail.com](mailto:fathermikeschmitz@gmail.com).*

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