

Must I ‘fess up’ to a person I’ve wronged?

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Q. Do I have to tell someone that I’ve sinned against them if they don’t already know?

A. This is a very good question. People can often be plagued by guilt over an action that remains undiscovered. It is perfectly normal to want to “come clean” and ask for forgiveness.

Think of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” or Dostoyevsky’s “Crime and Punishment.” Both stories describe an incredible and hidden guilt that ultimately ends up driving the protagonist to a breakdown.

Carrying our sins alone can often be a great burden. Even when we are not in any danger of being “found out,” at times the sheer weight of remorse can be enough to send us seeking relief by any means we can imagine.

And sometimes, we imagine that admitting our guilt to the injured person is the thing that will bring us relief.

Even more, there are times when we wonder if we are obligated to tell the one we have offended of our offense. A person might not feel overwhelmingly guilty, but is concerned about whether or not they are supposed to admit their sin to the other.

No obligation

The short answer is: No, you do not have any obligation to tell someone that you have done something against them.

Simply put, when it comes to veracity, there is a difference between “lying” and “concealing the truth.”

A person may be under no obligation to reveal the truth to another. Furthermore, it is not a violation of either goods of truth or friendship to refuse to indict oneself, even in response to a direct question. And, yes, this principle is even true in cases of infidelity between spouses.

Now, keep in mind that we certainly do have to bring our sin before the Lord through the sacrament of confession. And, while in the sacrament of confession, we must be as forthright and candid as possible. In the context of confession, any relevant details must be included.

None of this is to encourage deceit or to praise some sort of “loophole” when striving for honesty in relationships. I personally prefer the idea of fully disclosing the unvarnished truth. It is easier and simpler. It even seems to be the most noble.

But, in some ways it is like the soldier who, out of shame or disgrace, chooses to do the “honorable thing” and fall on his sword.

In the soldier’s mind, he may be doing something very difficult and very noble. But, in reality, it would serve the people around him better if he picked up his sword and continued to fight.

Similarly, those who run the likelihood of destroying relationships or ruining lives through their desire to admit their fault to someone against whom they had sinned would be more honorable if they chose to love that person well.

Whom will benefit?

One question to ask could be: Would my confession to this person bring healing to our friendship, or would it merely bring relief to me?

In many cases, one's desire to "confess" is to avoid the pain of dealing with one's own guilt, not because admission of guilt would restore wholeness to the relationship.

Simply put, would I be confessing for their sake or simply to make myself feel better? If it is merely to make oneself feel better, then it is most likely not an act of love to reveal the offense.

If a person still remains unsettled with carrying their guilt, it could bless them greatly if they sought out counsel from a wise spiritual director or confessor. In those cases, a person would be able to get help with the burden of guilt without needlessly burdening the offended party.

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