

Why Catholic guilt is good for you

by **Michael Davis**

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I found myself dwelling on one chapter from early childhood: that blissful period when you're old enough to tell right from wrong, but on a purely theoretical level. I found a \$20 bill on my counter top and aimlessly shoved it in my pocket. Then, an hour later, Dad called me into the kitchen. "Michael, have you seen the 20 I left here?" I shook my head no; but, seeing how distressed he was, I took it from my pocket and said: "You can have mine, though." The look of unfathomable disappointment he gave me was worse than any slap on the rear.

The Church teaches that there are two reasons to avoid sin. One is fear of hell, which is sufficient; the other is love of God, which is perfect. The former is what everyone means by "Catholic guilt", and should really be called Catholic fear. The latter, the love of God, is Catholic guilt – and it's a wonderful thing.

Guilt isn't, after all, the feeling you get when the headmaster calls you into his office for fighting in the playground, which I relished. I strutted down those hallways bursting with pride, jutting out by bruised jaw and looking down my bloody nose. Fear is imperfect, if only because we might find the sin is worth the sanction. Guilt is the feeling you get when Dad finds out that you – his child, for whom he'd give his very life – have pilfered a measly \$20. That's perfect contrition. Fear is born of selfishness; guilt of love.

Anyway, because I knew God loved me, I knew I had it in my power to disappoint Him. But my Anglican pastors refused to tell me how. In fact, they seemed more intent on telling me what God wouldn't be upset with me for. He'd love me even if I was promiscuous, or drunk, or Buddhist. And no doubt they were right. But I could get all that from Miley Cyrus and Lady Gaga. Surely the Church doesn't exist to tell God how to be a good Father, but to teach us how to be good sons and daughters. I fell into a state the Church calls despair and became what she calls scrupulous. I was obsessed with the sins I wasn't sure I was committing. My prayers were very little more than, "Please, God, whatever I'm doing wrong, forgive me."

Which is why, since becoming Catholic, I've fallen madly in love with the confessional. The Church has this down to a science. She follows the formula every mother knows: "Your Father's upset with you for X, but don't worry. Do Y to show how sorry you are, and never do it again." Then, finally, that blessed assurance: "Of course He still loves you. Don't be silly."

Imperfect as we all are, we can't help but disappoint those we love most. There are only two ways to shake off that guiltiness: reconciliation or apostasy. We can either confess our sins and do penance, or we can turn God out of our hearts altogether.

This is my plea to lapsed (or "recovering", if you must) Catholics: please don't run from your guilt. Don't turn your back on God.

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