

On Guilt and Forgiveness

By Alfonso Ultima

The Church, as it is currently constructed, invests tremendous efforts and resources into the cultivation of guilt and guilty feelings. This is for economic and manipulatory reasons, having little or nothing to do with virtue or piety. A guilty person is easier to control than an innocent one, and so the Church makes sure that every person under its wing has some reason or other to feel guiltily.

This fact ought not be surprising to those who have had dealings with the Church. It is not even a secret of any kind. The inquisitions of the 50s and 70s, with their sham trials, wanton executions are shameful secrets of the Church, still even today relegated to whispers of a hidden terror. Yet guilt--the personal, vague, cosmic culpability of every person is a widely circulated doctrine. Everyone knows it. The possibility--the assurance--of forgiveness transforms the guiltiness cast upon the faithful into a wondrous and enlivening doctrine. Rather than an oppressive guilt-laden institution, the Church is perceived as a forgiving one. It wounds so that it can later apply the salve.

And yet it seems to me that whenever I ask a pious fellow about their guilt I am met with a parade of trivialities; a pear stolen, an evil thought, some promise not kept in its entirety, an innocuous but maliciously intended shout. Nothing, in my mind, worthy of conviction. When I press further, these

fellows explain that these incidents are mere examples -- shadows - of a Greater and More Abstract culpability born by the soul of each person. When I ask for what crime is this burden laid upon the souls of humanity they are unable to give a clear answer, providing as their only evidence for a Cosmic Guilt that they feel bad all the time. To me this is hardly convincing.

Followers of the Church feel miserable all the time because they occupy their days squinting at fragments of the Word of God trying desperately to arrange them into a coherent systematic connection between the spiritual world and the earthly one. As this is an exceedingly difficult task (not to say, impossible) and the Church insists that every one among us has responsibility to figure it out, they become demoralized. This feeling is suppressed until it becomes melancholy, whereupon the doctrine of universal guilt and its accompanying forgiveness become palatable, even delicious.

Guilt, in my mind, is only the connexion between an action and its reversal. That is to say, when you do a thing but desire to have done the opposite, or intended to have done to, the forsaken desire and intention, these are guilt. Punishment is a second action intended to bridge the chasm between the committed act and its reversal, to join them together and allow one to count for the other. Punishment is guilt actualized. And because punishment bridges what is and what is not, of necessity it manifests as pain.

Punishment does not alleviate guilt, but rather reinforces it, making it a physical reality.

Forgiveness, by contrast, seeks to banish guilt, and it does this by affirming the unreality of an act's reversal. When a crime is forgiven the tether between the deed and another state of affairs is severed. Free from this burden, the deed may sit at ease along with other, non-criminal actions, as if it were one itself. Forgiveness requires the negation of an a hypothetical act -- one yearned for -- and this can only be accomplished by a being or institution capable of this negation.

A crime against any worldly estate is only a crime if punishment is given, thus to forgive thefts or murders a magistrate need only forbear punishment of those things. Crimes against individuals cannot be forgiven by the victims, since a person cannot control their own wishes. Even if a victim and a perpetrator were friends, committed to remaining so, a crime between them would remain so, and guilt would be present. A crime against God? Well, who knows what that looks like. The reversal of an act against God is by definition impossible, since God could not wish a thing to be otherwise than it is, being omnipotent. Crimes against oneself cannot be forgiven for the same reasons as between victim and perpetrator.