

Mortal Sin

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Here is a question I get asked almost daily: "Is this a mortal sin?" Usually, the question is offered with great detail, and more often than not, the person asking it states: "I am just going to be safe and assume it is mortal unless you tell me something different."

First, in partial response to this and other questions about morality, it is not helpful to seek repeated reassurance about your moral

life. Seeking reassurance only fuels the suffering caused by obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and the scrupulous condition. While asking the question may relieve your anxiety briefly, in the long run it effectively prevents real spiritual growth. Seeking constant reassurance erodes your ability to discern what is important and necessary. Even serious sufferers of scrupulosity have a core moral system that directs their conscience. It is necessary to trust your inner wisdom in order to have hope of learning to manage your scrupulous condition. I know trust seems risky, and it produces anxiety, but it is necessary to take this step and wrestle with this challenge.

Second, seeking reassurance is not the way that people without scrupulosity live each day. This helpful observation can encourage healthy living. People who do not suffer with scrupulosity live lives with a certain confidence that they are doing well and responding to experiences appropriately. They do not slice and dice each decision and examine themselves repeatedly. They engage life believing that life has no secret road map, traps, or snares. Life is meant to be lived, not feared or questioned every single moment. To live this way is perfectly natural and pleases God. Confident living is not immoral, nor is it sinful.



With that somewhat extended preamble to our opening adequately considered, I can now answer the question, "Is this a mortal sin?"

The best pastoral advice and direction, the most honest answer to people who might ask a question about their moral life and responsibility is to refer them directly to a trusted confessor or spiritual director. No other response is acceptable, and no other response is honest and truly helpful.

The necessary dynamic in discerning culpability in matters that you are unsure of is to enter into a conversation with someone who can help you determine cause, effect, responsibility, full knowledge, and consent. Another person can also help you understand the nuances that are at work in decision-making. This is not to help you wiggle out of responsibility or to seek some sort of compromise of principle, but it is rather an honest discernment.

After all, mortal sin is deadly, not accidental. It destroys the relationship between the person and God and leads to eternal damnation if the sin is not confessed and forgiven. It deserves real discernment before it is identified and claimed definitively as mortal.

If you have the scrupulous condition, a confessor or spiritual director will help you discern the presence of mortal sin by first helping you determine if the action is strictly forbidden in sacred Scripture, canon law, or consistent Church teaching. For a sin to be mortal, it must be self-evident that it is indeed mortal, not what you might feel or think, but what is actually and truthfully mortal.

The confessor or director will also help you to determine if the action was willful, though it is difficult to determine what each individual might identify as "my will." Points to consider might include: Were you fully awake or half-asleep? Would you have carried out the action, even if you thought about it in detail or is it really just a thought or a fantasy? Were you so disconnected from your true self through distraction,

apprehension, or some other experience that you felt you did not know what you were doing?

In addition to these questions, the confessor will help you determine if you truly consented to what you may have done or if there was a degree of resistance in your consent. For example, even though you thought of something or imagined it, it could also be true that you knew there was no real chance that you would ever really do it. You feared doing it, or you feared the consequences of doing it and would therefore not do it. Another consideration would be to understand that your basic orientation toward life is to serve God faithfully. That is your dominant intention, and you would not expressly consent to mortal sin.

This list is obviously not exhaustive but hopefully it at least illustrates effectively the serious considerations and deliberations that are necessary when you are trying to determine if an action is sinful or mortally sinful.

Mortal sin is a serious matter, and discerning whether an action

is a mortal sin must also be serious. Identifying an action as a mortal sin should not be the first thought that comes to mind if you have scrupulosity. Your tendency to name something as a moral sin should be recognized for what it is: a fear, generated by the scrupulous condition, to convince you that you are eternally vulnerable and worthy of condemnation.

In conclusion, scrupulous people should consistently remind themselves that their feeling of fear and anxiety is real, but the feeling does NOT indicate any kind of sin. The feeling is NOT an indication of mortal sin. When such a feeling reveals itself to those of you with the scrupulous condition, I recommend you tell yourself this:

"I should in all confidence assume that I have NOT committed a mortal sin but accept that I am anxious and fearful. There is a difference." ⚙

***Even serious
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In his **Sermon on the Mount**, Jesus tells us not to worry so much because doing so won't add any time to our lives. He also tells us not to worry about what we will eat and how we'll clothe ourselves. We should not even worry a great deal about the future. But he adds that today's worries are enough. The key is to let God work in our lives so that these concerns are manageable.

A good distinction here is between worry and fear. Worry is something that in a limited way is good. It keeps us from acting dangerously or haphazardly. If I had no capacity to worry at all, then I might start coming to work whenever I wanted to, unafraid of losing my job. I might even stop worrying about turning off the burner on the stove, no longer afraid that the house could burn down.

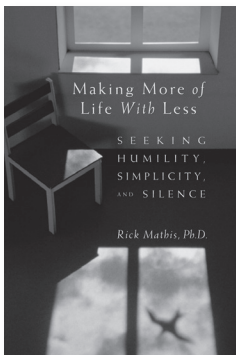
Problems start when such "helpful" worries become fears. If I worry so much about keeping my job that I become absorbed by it, then I am acting out of fear. If I am so worried about my house burning down that I can't leave it without checking the burner a hundred times, then I'm acting out of fear there as well.

A good antidote to all-consuming fear is to focus on the love of God. No matter what happens to us, we have the assurance of victory in the end. Given the normal stresses of life, however, it isn't easy to get to the point where we are no longer afraid, and our worries are limited along the lines of Jesus' advice in the Sermon on the Mount. People today worry about such things as losing their jobs due to economic downturns, the breakup of their families due to divorce, terrorism, and identity theft.

There's a lot to worry about and a lot to be fearful of. Although worry is impossible to get rid of completely, there are ways to reduce it to manageable levels. One of the best ways is to practice silence. This means focusing upon the constant chatter in your head and decreasing the chatter that creates stress and anxiety.

It is through silence that we often find God. Our words simply cannot grasp that which is in many respects beyond comprehension. We can carry over this experience and this silence to our daily life by learning to include silence in our prayer life and in our interactions with others. We can learn to silence ourselves when we start to say an unkind word or when we know we're about to engage in a conversation that creates ill will. And we can learn to be silent within ourselves, practicing a deep reverence in our internal dialogue. ⚙

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Q I fear I committed a serious sin because I broke the eucharistic fast. After I received holy Communion, I discovered food particles from breakfast in my mouth. Should I confess this?

A Absolutely not. You have not committed a sin. The eucharistic fast is a spiritual discipline, not to be easily discarded, but it can be discarded for a variety of reasons. You cannot discard something that is a mortal sin. If it is a mortal sin, it is a mortal sin. Period. Your example is not even related to sin. It is related to hypersensitivity and the fear of sin. It is not a sin.

Q I recently read, in a highly regarded Catholic publication, that it is a mortal sin to attend an invalid marriage ceremony, and there are no exceptions to this rule and standard. No matter what anyone might say, there are no exceptions.

A I believe you are using the term “Catholic publication” in a very generous manner. There is no such prohibition in Catholic discipline and practice that would support this position. It reflects a rigidity for the sake of making a dubious theological point. I would call to mind what Jesus often said to the scribes and Pharisees about burdens and rules.

The Memorial of Saint Alphonsus Liguori, Bishop and Doctor of the Church

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“Contradictions, sickness, scruples, spiritual aridity, and all the inner and outward torments are the chisel with which God carves his statues for paradise.”

Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787)



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