

Chocolate or Strawberry?

FR. ROBERT FENILI, CSSR

Would you say that ice cream flavors are particularly important? After all, picking one is not a life-changing decision. That is, until you stop to examine how it affects you or others. For example, if you are courting a newfound love who insists on a strawberry sundae, your flavor choice might be a bit more important.

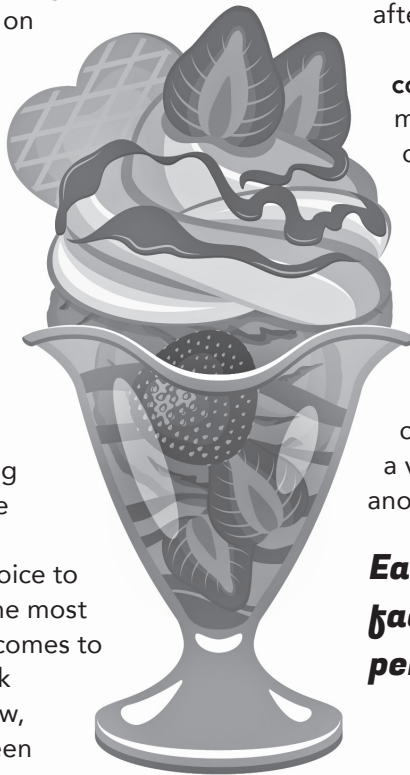
To evaluate a choice, you must consider the intention when making that choice. Choosing an ice cream flavor to please someone else is different than choosing your own favorite flavor. Acting for another's happiness is morally different than doing something simply to please yourself.

This relationship of a choice to the intention behind it is the most essential element when it comes to questions of sin. If you seek to be obedient to God's law, all your choices must be seen

in this light. Every act has consequences—some are intended and predictable, and some are unforeseen and may or may not be desirable. For example, your new friend may be delighted with a strawberry sundae or, on the other hand, may develop a stomachache after eating it.

Only God can foresee all consequences. This is true no matter how major or minor the case may be. For example, if I come upon a man threatening a group of children with a knife, and I grab a rock and beat him into unconsciousness, is my violence against him sinful, or is it virtuous? My intention is to stop him from harming children, so, with that intention, it is a virtuous act. Even though harming another person is in itself evil, I have

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chosen the lesser evil: harming the violent man instead of letting him harm the children. Choosing the lesser of two evils is a virtuous choice. But, what if I got carried away and harmed him more than was necessary to stop him? Then, my action may be sinful.

This ambiguity is the source of scrupulosity. Scrupulous people consider the possible results of every choice and expect to make an omniscient (“divine know-it-all”) decision. Someone who is scrupulous may confuse the difference between his or her ability to know the future and God’s omniscience. The scrupulous person must simply remind him- or herself, “I am not God.”

If you are scrupulous, you can take comfort in the knowledge that you desire to avoid

evil (vice) and do what is good (virtue). If you remember this basic stance in life, you can worry less about the possibility of sinning. **Sinfulness requires that you deliberately choose to do what you know to be wrong or refuse to do what you know to be right.** If the choice you make, with your limited knowledge, seems to be good, then you have not sinned. God takes your limitations into account and is not offended, no matter the consequences. You did the best you could do.

And so, to go back to the ice-cream parlor with your friend, if you are sure that your friend wants a certain flavor, and you purposely buy a different flavor because your friend “can’t tell me what to do,” you are not honoring your friendship. If you make no effort to remember your friend’s favorite flavor or fail to ask what he or she prefers, perhaps you are a mediocre friend, and you will want to work on that.

Every person has limitations. We have differences in our upbringing, intelligence, knowledge, health, energy, and so on. No two of us think the same way or react the same way in every situation. But each of us is made in God’s image, and each of us reflects a face of God that no other person can reflect, even as we are slowly and imperfectly growing in holiness. ✨

Fr. Robert Fenili CSSR is a retired Redemptorist priest whose ministry was mainly in educating members of the Congregation by the training of new members in its seminary and college. He also published books or translations of material for retreats and directed in-service programs for active personnel. He spent several years as a member of the international governing council in Rome which allowed him to visit Redemptorist ministries throughout the world. He also served in parishes and retreat centers.

Depression: A Medical Condition, Not a Moral Failing

DR. CONSTANCE J. SALHANY

“Enough, LORD! Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4). These are the words of the mighty prophet Elijah, who prior to this moment had interceded with God to call forth fire from heaven, defeat the prophets of Baal, and raise to life the widow’s son. Yet, in this moment, he experienced painful depression. He sat under a broom tree and prayed for death. If someone like Elijah can experience depression, then anyone can.

Misconceptions

Too often, people struggle with depression alone, without proper medical help, without compassion from their family or colleagues, without recognizing that they have a medical condition that is treatable, not a moral failing due to some weakness or character flaw. Two common misconceptions:

If I had more faith, I wouldn’t feel this way.

There are many examples of holy people who have struggled with depression, including St. Augustine, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. All human beings are vulnerable to ailments and conditions. When people get sick with the flu or develop arthritis, they do not blame it on a lack of faith. Why should it be different with clinical depression?

I should be able to do this myself, without a therapist.

One cannot simply “snap out of” clinical depression. When we have physical medical problems, we see doctors. We go to mechanics, plumbers, and electricians to help us keep our cars running and our homes in good order. Why would we not seek help with mental or emotional difficulties? There

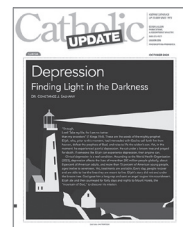


is no shame in getting treatment. In fact, the most loving thing a depressed person can do may be to seek help to become the best person—and thus the best spouse, parent, or friend—he or she can be.

Elijah’s story did not end under the broom tree. God gave him a long nap and sent an angel to give him nourishment. He ate and then journeyed forty days and nights to Mount Horeb, the “mountain of God,” to discover his mission. ⚙

From “Depression:
Finding Light in the Darkness”
by Dr. Constance J. Salhany
(C2410A).

To order, visit Liguori.org
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Q. *I like mountain biking, especially downhill. I like the adrenaline of it and taking hard terrain, but I go fast at times and risk injury. I am wondering if this is sinful.*

A. No, it is not sinful. There is a risk, but if you take the proper precautions, then you are doing what is required and prudent. It is something you can enjoy. Many things in life are risky, but that does not mean that they are sinful.



ANNARI / SHUTTERSTOCK

Q. *When I was a child, I made a simple vow of chastity. As a teenager, I wanted to be a nun or a consecrated virgin, although I never entered a convent. But now, I have changed my mind and want to get married and have children. Does my earlier vow serve as an impediment to marriage? Do I need a dispensation?*

A. No, you do not need a dispensation. A vow becomes binding only if it is public and only if it is received and confirmed by a person with the authority to receive a vow. Your vow was a simple act of piety. It was not binding and is not an impediment to any future choices or decisions.

Additional Resources Online for Those Seeking Help

Liguori Publications offers resources online that people with scrupulosity have found very helpful:

For helpful videos, please visit [YouTube/Catholic OCD](#).

For pastoral care and spiritual direction opportunities, please visit [managingscrupulosity.com](#).

For direct support and to access new helpful videos, please visit [Patreon.com/CatholicOCD](#). (Patreon offers a direct mail feature that can be used to answer your personal questions and concerns.)

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