

## ***“Echoes of the Heart”***

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

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**No regrets! Really?** A professor of philosophy at a Catholic university likes to begin her introductory ethics courses with a hypothetical question. If you were to live to be 80 years old, what would you like to be able to say about yourself? Over the years, her students—mostly Catholics and Lutherans—often impress her with their sensitive responses about virtue and character.

However, in recent years she has noticed that many of her students want to be able to say (about their life) that they have *no regrets*, that they wouldn't do anything differently. It is as if the avoidance of moral regret has become their life goal. This seems to be an emerging pattern in our wider culture as well.

If we think about it, do we really want to live lives that are totally *beyond regret*? For that to happen, we'd have to either live *risk free* lives or have a conscience that was not very discerning about the adverse consequences our behaviors may have caused over the years.

When we live active, passionate lives, stuff is going to happen—things we can't totally control. Sometimes, we're going to say too much or not say it in the most sensitive way. Other times, we're going to do things that don't anticipate the possible consequences—consequences that are troubling and perhaps even painful to others whom we care about. Our sins, even if forgiven, have repercussions.

**Regret and consequences.** To *not* regret imprudent or immoral actions simply because *things seem to have settled* and we've been able to move on with our lives underestimates the possibly painful consequences. It feeds an *the ends justify the means* mentality that trivializes the depths of the pain and hurt we cause people along our life's journey.

Sometimes, long after a husband's adulterous affair, both husband and wife will comment how their marriage is actually better and how they've grown to this wonderful new stage of marital bliss.

Still, is there no regret? Would the husband now say to his forgiving spouse, *I'm so glad, now, that I committed adultery, aren't you?*

From God's point of view, is the sin somehow necessary for the marriage to receive this much-welcomed blessing? Hardly! And not only that, no matter how renewed the marriage, still, there is always an element of shadow cast over it, a shadow which didn't have to be and which lives on in the memory and psyche of those involved.

**Regret and the mercy of God.** The larger reality this points to is that to have no regrets in life cuts us off from any human experience of the mercy of God. No matter anything about us, sin is always a constant state of the human condition. It's not something we can

transcend or suddenly absolve ourselves from.

What we can do, however, is be forgiven. And the forgiveness we receive can and does give us renewed empowerment to live again—not in denial of our regrets in life, but on the other side, humbled and grateful for the grace that has poured over us.

Part of what this is about is that an anticipation of regret can be used as a tool for resisting moral temptation in the first place. We anticipate regret by simply asking ourselves, before hand: *am I going to regret this afterwards?* After I violate my marriage vows; after I accept money that's not rightfully mine; or after I distort the truth in ways I know are wrong.

Because regret is *not* morally neutral, an awareness of possible moral regret has the power to influence our behaviors in the moment. It arouses in us the shame we ought to feel while, at the same time—hopefully—leading us to the forgiveness we surely need.

It's one thing to wish for a life of fewer regrets as opposed to more. It's another thing to be dismissive of regret simply because we want our life to be focused forward. Sometimes the moving forward is forever a limp because the wounds of the past forever weight us down.

To live a life of passion and commitment will undoubtedly cause some regret along the way. But that's okay. Our regrets are part of our humanity. But they are also a part of our healing and renewal that take us to a better place.