

The seven deadly sins –The sickening 7

The Black Death, the influenza outbreak of 1918, AIDS – all are deadly epidemics that killed tens of thousands at different times in the history of mankind.

But all these plagues pale in comparison to the pandemic that started in the Garden of Eden. When sin entered the world, a far deadlier force confronted mankind. As Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna” (Mt 10:28).

To die of a disease is an evil; to die in serious sin is an eternal tragedy. History books and the evening news make us aware of the mortal ills of mankind. In our day, it is difficult to be uninformed on the medical problems that confront us. However, sin, the deadliest of diseases, garners far less media coverage. It is our Catholic faith that points us to the seriousness of this deadly problem and shows us the remedies.

In the millennia since the Fall, men and women have found many ways to turn from God and embrace evil. However, there are seven sinful tendencies that provide the root causes that branch out into the many individual sins. These are known as the seven capital or “deadly” sins.

Actually, “sin” is probably not the best term for these seven. In everyday speech, we normally equate sin with action or inaction. Perhaps a better term would be the seven vices – what the dictionary defines as “serious moral failing” or “personal failing [or] flaw.” While not necessarily mortal in themselves, these capital sins give rise to other sins that can be deadly to the life of the soul.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists them as “pride, avarice (greed), envy, wrath, lust, gluttony and sloth” (No. 1866). They are insidious sins because they can be hidden from view. For instance, it is possible to refrain from punching someone in the nose and still be devoured by anger. Or, someone may avoid adultery and yet burn with lust.

Obvious sinful actions are more likely to be dealt with if for no other reason than the negative social complications. However, if the underlying sinful tendency is not addressed, there is only a temporary reprieve for the soul. The world, the flesh and the devil find fertile ground in these seven vices.

These sinful tendencies require radical surgery to be rooted out. In fact, many spiritual writers recommend not “removal” but “displacements”— substitute virtues for these deadly sins.

So let’s explore these seven spiritual diseases and consider some of the remedies.

Pride

Definition: “Pride is undue self-esteem or self-love, which seeks attention and honor and sets oneself in competition with God” (see the Catechism’s glossary).

Symptoms: Wow! Being in competition with God is not a good place to be. And in our personal struggles with pride, we probably don’t think that we are competing with God. Yet a little reflection will show the truth of what the Catechism teaches.

The proud person takes credit for what legitimately belongs to God. So, I point to my achievements and my gifts and my talents. Grace and God’s providential care are, at best, viewed as secondary causes. Pride also seeks to downplay personal defects and minimize faults, thereby tending not to recognize and repent of sins. The prideful person believes he

is better than others and will disparage their accomplishments to fortify his own image both to himself and to others. The prideful person will even magnify the failings of others.

Pride comes in varying degrees, but when it reaches the point of unwillingness to acknowledge dependence on God and refuses to submit to him and his Church, it is a grave sin. The Catechism points out that pride can even lead to hatred of God (No. 2094).

Remedies: Humility is the antidote for pride. The humble person joyfully embraces the truth that everything in life is ultimately a gift from God. Humility is not low self-esteem – there is some personal merit in responding to God’s grace and call. Yet the humble person is always grateful and seeks to give God all the glory. A sober recognition of one’s sins and a desire to repent also counters pride and fosters humility. Rather than contending with God, the humble person lives as a dutiful, obedient and thankful son or daughter of the heavenly Father.

Avarice (Greed)

Definition: “Greed [is] the desire to amass earthly goods without limit. . . . Avarice [arises] from a passion for riches and their attendant power” (No. 2536).

Envy

Definition: Envy refers to the sadness at the sight of another’s goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly” (No. 2539). St. Paul encourages us to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). The envious person rejoices when others weep and

weeps when others have cause to rejoice.

Symptoms: This sin manifests itself in various ways, such as malicious gossip, detraction, resentment and even outright hatred of others. Dante writes that the eyes of the envious are sewn shut in hell because in life they could not, or would not, see and give thanks for the good, the true and the beautiful. This deadly vice separates the envious person from the joy and solidarity of community. Its fruit is bitterness because it never satisfies.

Envy breaks friendship, dividing individuals and families. It can separate man from God. The book of Wisdom tells us that it was envy that prompted Satan to tempt Adam and Eve. The devil, whose pride had caused his estrangement from God, could not bear to see man enjoy a relationship with God. The result of the envy of the devil was the temptation of man and the entrance of death into our lives (Wis 2:24).

Remedies: Humility and gratitude are cures for the disease of envy. It certainly is a sin that reason opposes because the results, estrangement from others and the joy to be found there, are self-defeating. But perhaps the best counter for envy is the ability to accept the suffering that we will certainly encounter in this world. Christ suffered and embraced suffering as the path of love and, through it, brought redemption. He sought our well-being and emptied himself – the opposite of envy. The result was that, instead of the separation caused by envy, we now can enjoy union with God as members of his family. So, if we join our little suffering with that of Christ, we can “be of good cheer” (Jn 16:33), for Christ has opened the gates of heaven for us. In that joy, envy will find no home.

Wrath (Anger)

Definition: Anger can be a virtue, it can be a vice, and it can be neither. Anger is one of the array of emotions that

come in the human package. As an emotion, it is neutral. How we handle that anger can make the difference between victory over sin or succumbing to it. At times, anger is justified. For example, we should be angry at injustice in our world. If that anger helps us to act righteously, then it has helped us to move toward goodness.

But a certain form of anger, perhaps best called “wrath,” is one of the capital sins. Anger, “when it is not controlled by reason or hardens into resentment and hate, becomes one of the seven capital sins. Christ taught that anger is an offense against the fifth commandment” (Catechism glossary).

Symptoms: The anger that is a capital sin is a disorder of the emotion. It gives reign to passion over reason. It can be an offense against charity when it is manifested in ways that hurt others by word or action. Anger can also be contrary to justice when it seeks revenge against another.

There is hot anger that others tend to see. The individual with this problem may be motivated to conquer the fault because of its negative consequences in interpersonal relationships. However, anger can be less visible. Cold anger lies below the surface and can be unseen until manifested in the cutting word, contempt, quarreling or indignation. Anger can rob an individual of peace and can cause various mental disturbances. Blasphemy and cursing often arise because of anger. Even though many sins of anger are venial, anger can lead to mortal sins such as hatred and revenge – sins less prompted by emotion and more by decisions of the will.

Like envy, anger gives the sinner little satisfaction. In a letter to a noble woman, St. Catherine of Siena wrote, “There is no sin nor wrong that gives a man such a foretaste of hell in this life as anger and impatience.”

Remedies: One virtue that can offset anger is meekness. Unfortunately, this is a virtue that gets bad press and tends

to be misunderstood. Meekness is patient submission to the will of God in the midst of sufferings and trials. Christ tells us that the meek "will inherit the land" (Mt 5:5).

My favorite definition of meekness is "strength under control." Scripture tells us that Moses "was by far the meekest man on the face of the earth" (Nm 12:3). Now we know that Moses didn't possess that virtue at an early stage of his life. In a fit of anger, he killed an Egyptian foreman who was abusing an Israelite on a work crew. The passion of anger was out of control in his life. But later Moses overcame his anger. He could take the insults of Pharaoh and rely not on his own strength, but upon God's. The example of Moses should give hope to all of us. When we trust God, we, too, can be meek and live not with anger but with reliance on the strength of the Lord.

Lust

Diagnosis: "Lust is disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure" (No. 2351). It's difficult to live a day in Western culture without being confronted by a temptation to lust. The popular anti-gospel proclaims that we should be sexually liberated. The truth is that our culture is dying from a deadly sin, the plague of lust. In fact, the odor of the rotting corpse is daily evident to those whose minds have been renewed in Christ (see Rom 12:2).

Symptoms: Lust dehumanizes other people and views them as objects for pleasure. It also dehumanizes the sinner who gives reign to lower, animal passions, rather than to true love. St. Bernard tells us that while lust appears to please the body, it is killing the soul.

All sin can be "addicting," but perhaps lust more so than many other sins. While promising pleasure and "freedom," lust only delivers a hollow and momentary pleasure and leads to a form of bondage that imprisons. The depth of the problem is

revealed in the startling statistics on pornography and the sins that spring from it.

To overcome lust, the person must first admit the problem. This in itself is a big step in a society that sees little wrong in impure television programs and salacious advertising. The normal means of overcoming sin (prayer, the sacraments, growth in virtue) are important. But a level of accountability, perhaps to a spouse or spiritual director, can be very helpful for those who have a powerful struggle with this sin.

Remedies: In a society so sin-saturated in this area, a firm understanding of Church teaching is very important. Pope John Paul II's theology of the body reveals the truth and beauty about sexuality. There are many good books now available that make his teaching accessible. While lust blinds men to the true beauty of human sexuality, the truth brings light. Pope John Paul II also often extolled the virtue of chastity, which is the answer to a disordered sexuality.

If you need some extra encouragement to deal with lust, recall the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). We are made for the beatific vision of God in all his glory. That is a beauty we don't want to miss.

Gluttony

Definition: Gluttony is "overindulgence in food or drink" (Catechism glossary). If a culture can be said to be guilty of a capital sin, gluttony may be the defining sin of Western culture – "too soon, too expensively, too much, too eagerly, too daintily" (1918 Catholic Encyclopedia on gluttony). For the glutton, "god is [his] belly" (Phil 3:19). When excesses in drinking or eating affect a person's health or his ability to discharge his duties, it can be a serious sin.

Symptoms: In addition to overindulgence, gluttony also can

manifest itself in “delicacy.” Here the individual demands that everything be just a certain way. With food, the demand might be that it be the right temperature, just flavored precisely, a portion only of a certain size or cooked a certain way. If the arbitrary criteria are not met, the person will reject the food or demand that it be as she or he desires. The delicate glutton demands to be pampered and satisfied according to his expectations.

Remedies: Temperance, which puts the pleasures of this life in a proper perspective, is the virtue that opposes this capital sin.

Fasting and little acts of self-denial can help a person overcome this vice, especially when coupled with prayer that joins these acts to those of Christ.

If we need an extra incentive to overcome gluttony, just think of this proverb when you pick up an eating utensil: “Put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony” (Prov 23:2).

Sloth

Definition: Sloth is “a culpable lack of physical or spiritual effort” (Catechism glossary). Dante writes that this vice is rooted in insufficient love. St. Thomas Aquinas sees this paucity of love in the background of all other sins.

Symptoms: The sluggard has the “I-don’t-care attitude.” He lacks motivation, resisting work or effort. He is complacent. But we are called to love, and love makes demands: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:30). The slothful person looks the other way when confronted by the demands of love.

Sloth also is counter to the grace of our baptism. When we

enter the family of God, we are to take up the family responsibilities. We are to go and make disciples. We are to love our Father and all our brothers and sisters.

Remedies: What is the antidote? Be cautious here. The answer is not to become a workaholic. That, too, is an imbalance. In fact, it is possible to be a workaholic and still be slothful. Feverish activity can be a means of avoiding the real demands of the Gospel.

The virtue that counters sloth is zeal. This virtue is a wholehearted and energetic response to God's commands. Zeal is at the center of the beatitude: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6). And those who hunger for God "shall be satisfied."

Conclusion

Reflection on the capital sins is one format for an examination of conscience. It can help to diagnose sinful patterns or inclinations in our life. Most often, the capital sins are not at the more serious level of mortal sin.

However, untreated, they move us in the direction of serious sin. So it is important to identify the point of weakness and struggle. Cooperating with God's grace and growing in virtue are important.

A particular capital sin may be so rooted in a person that he no longer recognizes it as sin. Sometimes we try to excuse ourselves by saying: "That's just the way I am," or "Everyone gets angry or complacent." But God does call us to more. If one of the capital sins has a hold in my life, I should submit it to the Divine Physician. The sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist, are great helps. A daily examination of conscience on my particular sin is a great practice. It only takes five minutes of review at the end of the day: "How have I given way to lust or sloth or whatever is

the root of my struggle?" Repent, make an act of amendment and ask for God's grace for the battle tomorrow. Also, thank God for his grace whenever you make progress.

Battling the deadly sins is a struggle, but we are people of hope because Christ has already won the victory. In him, sin and death are defeated. In him is glorious life.

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