

An Overview of the Seven Cardinal Sins

Too many Christians know little about the twisted nature of sin. They just know they're a little (or very!) messed up and can't seem to figure out why. Have you ever gone to the doctor, not knowing what was wrong with you, and left feeling better just because you finally knew that what ailed you had a name and a cure? Being able to name our demons is an essential part of growth and healing. Naming things is a form of authority over them.

The seven Cardinal Sins (sometimes called capital or deadly) are deeper than mere actions. They are attitudes, thoughts or drives. They run so deeply in our fallen nature that we are often unaware of their presence.

Pride – The tendency of esteeming oneself more than is proper and at the same time denigrating the goodness of others. Pride also stirs us to reject the lawful authority of others, including God, over us and to refuse appropriate submission. The proud man is under pressure since he seeks to live the lie he is more than he really is. St. Gregory lists four species of Pride: 1 – Thinking that my gifts are from myself. 2- Ceding the point that my gifts are from God but are due to my deserving them. 3 – Claiming an excellence I do not possess. 4 – Despising others and their gifts and thinking that I am the sole possessor of what I have. Pride can be a mortal sin, but most often it is venial on account of its pervasiveness in us, and our dullness of mind that is barely even aware of its presence.

The Daughters of Pride are not delineated in the tradition. This is because pride is such a general vice that it is not merely the source of other sins, it is *in* them. St. Gregory does not list pride as one of the Capital sins but calls it the mother of them all. Other authors distinguish the general vice of pride, from the special vice of pride by calling it Vanity, or Vainglory and in this sense include it among the Capital or deadly sins.

“PALE GAS”



PRIDE
ANGER
LUST
ENVY
GLUTTONY
AVARICE
SLOTH

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:16-17)

Of the virtues that are medicine for pride surely humility is the chief one of all. Humility is the virtue whereby I regard the truth about myself. Gratitude also helps since, by it, I acknowledge the countless gifts of God. Filial fear, almsgiving, docility, respect, faith, temperance and modesty are also helpful.

Greed – The insatiable desire for more. Greed is excessive desire for wealth, possessions and comforts. It is not wrong to desire what we need, but through greed we acquire far beyond what is reasonable and fail to be generous. Through greed we can also come to see the things of this world as more precious than the things of Heaven. Greed is ultimately a lie because, by it, we think that more of the things of this finite world will satisfy our infinite longing. But only God can satisfy that.

The “daughters” of Greed are: fraud, lying, perjury, dissatisfaction (restlessness), violence, and hardheartedness. This list makes it clear that those who are increasingly beset by greed will often be willing to lie and commit fraud to obtain what they think they deserve or cannot live without. Greed also crushes generosity and so one more easily becomes hard-hearted. Individuals and nations may also have recourse to violence to obtain what they inordinately desire. Dissatisfaction (a kind of ingratitude) flows from greed as well, since one resents not having what they inordinately desire.

Of the virtues that are medicine for Greed surely generosity is the chief virtue, followed closely by gratitude. For indeed, we already have so much for which to be grateful and when our focus is there, a kind of joy permeates our soul that makes us more generous and kind to others. Another virtue that is key is trust and faith in God. For, when we trust God through faith, we are less concerned about the needs of tomorrow, Providence will provide. This in turn assists the fruitful virtue of peace. Mercy and love are also virtues that open us to the needs of others. And as always, prudence will assist us in knowing the measure of what we really need and what is excessive.

Lust - excessive or inappropriate desires or thoughts of a sexual nature. It is not wrong to experience sexual desire *per se* but Lust moves this to become excessive (all that matters), or for the object of it to be inappropriate (*e.g.* sexually fantasizing about someone other than a spouse). More broadly, lust is thought of as an excessive love of others that makes the love of God secondary.

The “daughters” of Lust are: darkness of mind, thoughtlessness, inconstancy, rashness, self-love, hatred of God, love of this world, and abhorrence or despair of a future world. St Paul well describes the darkness of mind that comes from suppressing the truth about sexuality (cf Rom 1:17ff). As one’s mind grows darker, strange practices once thought shameful are approved. One also becomes thoughtless by denying consequences of unreasonable and sinful use of the sexual faculties, one is also thoughtless in how they treat other people and the children born from illicit sexual unions. Behaviors become increasingly rash and only the pleasures of this world are sought. Finally one comes to treat God and the Church as an enemy for daring to suggest that illicit sexual union is sinful.

Of the Virtues that are Medicine for Lust – Clearly temperance, continence, and chastity are the key virtues. But justice also demands that we respect the prerogatives of the marriage bed (*cf* Heb 13:4). Piety, namely family love, also helps, so that the sexual bond is kept safe to strengthen the family. Shamefacedness, sobriety, modesty and self-control are all recommendable as well. Respect and reverence for God and neighbor are also of assistance.

Anger – inordinate and uncontrolled feelings of hatred and wrath. It is not always wrong to experience anger, especially in the presence of injustice. But anger here is understood as a deep drive which we indulge and wherein we excessively cling to angry and hateful feelings for others. This kind of anger most often seeks revenge.

The “daughters” of anger are: quarreling, swelling of the mind, contumely (contempt or derision), clamor, indignation and blasphemy. For indeed, sometimes anger is directed at one who we deem unworthy, and this is called "indignation." Sometimes wrathful anger manifests a pride where our anger is rooted in obstinate opinions and superiority. And anger surely gives birth to quarreling, derisiveness, and clamor. Anger directed at God often produces blasphemy.

Of the Virtues that are medicine for anger – Clearly meekness is the chief virtue to moderate anger. Meekness is the proper middle ground between too much anger and not enough anger. Clearly the virtues associated with Charity such as love and peace along with proper fraternal correction assist in both curbing anger and directing it to useful ends. Prudence too will help direct and moderate anger especially through the foresight, circumspection, caution, counsel and discrimination proper to it. Finally humility helps alleviate the swollen mind of anger.

Gluttony - overindulgence in or overconsumption of anything to the point of waste. We usually think of gluttony in terms of food and drink, but it can extend to other areas as well. This sin usually leads to a kind of laziness and self-satisfaction that allows little room for God and the spiritual life. It may also cause us to be less able to help the poor.

The “daughters” of Gluttony are: unseemly joy, scurrility (being vulgar or coarse), uncleanness, loquaciousness, and dullness of mind as regards the understanding. For reason’s keenness is dulled by immoderate meat and drink on account of the labor of digesting food. Unseemly joy comes from too much drink as is well attested. Loquaciousness comes from sitting too long at the table and also from too much wine; so too the foul tongue and unguarded speech of scurrility. Soon enough one is unclean from the vomit of excess, or the sins of drunkenness.

Of the Virtues that are Medicine for Gluttony – Surely temperance, moderation and sobriety are the key virtues, self-control too. Prudence will also help govern one’s immoderate longings. Love for the poor also helps so we do waste food or drink.

Envy - sorrow or sadness at the goodness or excellence of another person because one believes it makes him appear to be less so. If I envy someone I want to diminish or undermine his excellence. Note that envy is *not* the same as jealousy. If I am jealous of you I want what you have. In contrast, if I am envious of you, I want to diminish or destroy what is good or excellent

in you. St. Augustine called envy *the* diabolical sin because of the way it seeks to eliminate excellence and goodness in others.

The “daughters” of Envy are: tale-bearing, detraction, schadenfreude, hatred. By these things we seek to denigrate others or reduce the esteem which they are owed. In effect I dismiss the good and destroy its influence.

Of the virtues that are medicine for envy: The tradition supplies especially two: Joy and zeal. For the proper response at the excellence or good fortune of another is joy. Zeal is the virtue whereby we seek to imitate the excellence of others insofar as possible. Charity too bids us to see that my neighbor and I are one, and when he is honored or blessed, so am I.

Sloth - sorrow or sadness at the good things God wants to do in one’s life. Most people think of sloth as laziness, but it is really an avoidance of God. In sloth, I avoid God because I fear or dislike what He can do for me. Some people avoid God through laziness, but others avoid Him by becoming workaholics, claiming that they are too busy to pray, to attend Mass, or to think about spiritual things.

The “daughters” of Sloth are: malice, spite, faint-heartedness, despair, sluggishness in regard to the commandments, wandering of the mind after unlawful things. For indeed, sloth can make us hate and thus have malice and spite for the good things of God. Then too there are the obvious daughters listed here which proceed from a sort of oppressive sorrow at the good things of God.

Of the Virtues that are medicine for sloth: As with envy, joy and zeal are essential. So too are Magnanimity and magnificence whereby we think great things and do them. By faith we learn to appreciate the good things of God and by charity we learn to love them. By almsgiving we intentionally move outside our self. And, by justice we are motivated to render to God and others what is their due.

To these traditional seven drives or thoughts, it is helpful to add:

Fear – One of the deepest habit patterns of sin, and people don't recognize it as sin right away, is fear. It's awesome to find out how afraid we are. We're afraid of everybody! We're afraid of everything! We're more afraid of man, than we are of God. We're afraid of physical dangers, sure. But mostly we're afraid of being rejected by other people, of not being liked by other people. And people will do almost anything to go along with the flow: Gossip, lie, drop out of school, use drugs, jump into bed, commit just about any sin, just to be liked, to fit in. We're so afraid and dominated by this fear that we'll sin rather than obey God. That's a very deep drive. Fear not only drives us to do many things, it also keeps us from many things we ought to do, like preaching the gospel. Think of the martyrs of old. And we're afraid if someone raises an eyebrow! Fear is one of the chief habit patterns of sin that brings about countless other sins. It has to go. We have to repent. Jesus did not die and rise from the dead so that we could remain locked in fear. He wants to show us this drive and begin the work of setting us free from it. Virtues such as trust, filial fear, faith, and docility are good medicines for this.

Hebrews 2:14-15) Now since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity, so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (diminishment).

Ingratitude - It's amazing how ungrateful we can be. Every day ten thousand things go right and perhaps a few things go wrong. If we're not careful we focus only on what went wrong. Even difficult things are often gifts, for Scripture says, *All things work together for good to those who love God* (Romans 8:28). Ingratitude is a sinful drive that leads to other sins. It leads to negativity and resentments, It reinforces fear. Since I'm not in touch with how God has blessed me, I get anxious and fearful about how I'll get what I need, and how things will work out. This in turn ignites anger and I become controlling and start to stomp on people to get my needs met. It also reinforces greed. Since I'm not in touch with how God can take care of me, I start to grasp and hoard. I'm too afraid to be generous. Ingratitude is a deeply negative drive. It has to go. Here too, Jesus did not die so that we would live lives of ingratitude and sourness. The normal Christian life is to be grateful for the countless gifts we receive from God every day. Thus, virtues of gratitude, joy, faith, trust and generosity must form the medicine for this deep drive.

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