

Life and Death

For the past three summers, I have used the summer bulletin columns to present a series on a particular aspect of our faith. They included: The different parts of the Mass, St. Ignatius' Rules of Discernment, and the seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

This summer we will look at the seven capital sins and their corresponding seven life-giving virtues. This article will provide an overview before we look at each pair of sin and virtue in more detail.

Let us begin by looking at the general concept of sin. According to the Catholic Catechism, "Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods" (CCC 1849). What a hefty definition!

We rightly think of sin as an offense against God. However, sin is also an offense against reason. Every now and then my aunt gets worked up while watching television where someone does something outlandish. She exclaims, "Why is he doing that? *What's* he thinking?" And I respond, "You're trying to think rationally. It's against reason. He's not thinking. That's the problem." Sin is an offense against reason. It is irrational.

Interestingly, the definition also says that sin is a *failure* in genuine love for God and neighbor attached by a certain attachment to certain goods. In other words, sin is a deprivation of love. We could also say that sin is misplaced love, i.e., it places too much emphasis on a created good (material possessions, honor, power, a cat, etc.) and not enough love for God and neighbor. Sometimes people say, "That person has his/her priorities all mixed up."

Unfortunately, sin is addictive. When one sins repeatedly, what oftentimes develops is a vice. A vice is a bad moral habit. Examples of vices include simple bad habits like biting your fingernails or eating too much chocolate. However, they can be more serious like drinking too much alcohol or viewing pornography. Anyone who has developed a vice knows how difficult it is to break!

In our tradition, there are certain sins that give birth to other sins. Just as lower-level drugs can act as gateways to more serious drugs, the same is true for sin. Gateway sins are called "capital sins." Capital sins engender or give birth to other sins. There are seven: Pride, avarice (greed), envy, anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth (acedia).

It is worth noting that capital sins, in and of themselves, are not necessarily grave sins. However, they should be avoided at all costs (as with all sin!) because they lead to other sins. The term capital (Latin *capitalis*) means head or beginning. Just as the head (or mind) directs the body, so capital sins are the head or beginning of other sins.

Experience suggests that each person tends to struggle with certain capital sins more than others. In fact, some people wrestle with one predominant capital sin their whole life. Part of the goal of this series is not only to shed light on each capital sin, but also to provide some strategies for rooting out capital sins in your life. Think of a garden. You not only need to know where the weeds are, but also the best strategies to remove them.

By pulling out the weeds of capital sins, you can replace them with their respective life-giving virtues. According to the Catholic Catechism, "A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself" (CCC 1803). In other words, the virtuous man or woman is truly free. He or she possesses the ability to regularly do what is good and just. Whereas the person steeped in vice is in bondage, the virtuous man or woman is able to live generously and sacrifice freely for others.

There are seven life-giving virtues that counter the seven deadly sins. They are: Humility, generosity, admiration, forgiveness, chastity, temperance, and zeal. These seven life-giving virtues are like vaccines that cure the viruses of capital sins. Essentially, sin is a spiritual disease that compromises your ability to love. The seven life-giving virtues, then, are like antibodies that enable you to remain healthy and fully live!

My hope is that this series not only helps you learn a little more about deadly sins and their respective life-giving virtues, but also equip you to grow in virtue so that you can experience the freedom and joy your heart deeply desires. May God be with you as we begin this little series together!

~St. Thérèse, pray for us!



There's a new sheriff in town. He's on the lookout for virtuous citizens who want to love and serve the Lord.