

We've all heard of the Seven Capital (or Deadly) Sins. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is built around the exploration of these impulses and how we the human person seeks to rise above them. These same impulses formed the fabric of the more recent story, the terrifying movie simply called *Seven*.

I've heard it described that the Seven Capital Sins are perhaps more properly understood as attitudes in the heart, *not yet* formally manifest as sin and further, that each of them can be thought of as a form of idolatry: pride is idolatry of self; gluttony, idolatry of food or drink; sloth, idolatry of comfort; and so on. So, along with lust, anger, and greed is the deadly sin, envy, the idolatry of status or possessions. And who of us doesn't know this nagging impulse?

Bertrand Russell posed that envy is one of the primary causes of unhappiness, often leading us to wish misfortune on others (*Metaphysics of Morals*). Consider Cain's murder of his brother, Abel, or the story of King David, who acted on his carnal desire for Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers. David's spiritual advisor, Nathan, laid it out for him, speaking on behalf of God: *I gave you everything I made you king, rescued you from your enemies, gave you a home and wives, and still more. Why have you taken what did not belong to you?* (2 Samuel, chapters 11-12).

Envy is at work in all three of our readings today. We hear of it in the Gospel, where the disciples are lobbying for status above each other, and it begins to create discord among them, despite having just heard Jesus' teaching, "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself... whoever wishes to save his life will lose it...*" (8:34-35).

At the end of that day's walk, I suspect Jesus knew what his disciples had been arguing about, yet he asked, "*What were you arguing about on the way?*" Undoubtedly, embarrassed, they were like children caught in the act, unable to spin their way out of it or even to give a sincere response, they remained dumb-silent. Jesus saw this as a teaching moment, as though thinking, "*All right, let's go over this again, for the umpteenth time... If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all, the servant of all.*"

Again, we all know this desire for things, for status, for acknowledgement, that we believe will lead to enduring fulfillment, and further, how this desire leads us to become preoccupied with other people's lives (*they're more popular, they get more attention and accolades*); their God-given attributes (*they're more attractive or highly skilled*); their state in life (*they've got a normal family, they've got it easy*); their possessions (*their car has more bells and whistles than mine, they've got the newer iPhone, while my parents have cursed me with the previous version*).

Aristotle defined envy as pain we experience caused by the good fortune of others. We fixate on it all and it makes us increasingly discontented, even to the extent that we find satisfaction in whatever way those of whom we are envious suffer losses.

Envy, this disordered desire, comes from a lie, telling us that our identity—how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us—is wrapped up in all those extrinsic realities: our stuff, accolades, those we're associated with, our talents and skills. The lie also tells us that God isn't enough, that He hasn't given us enough, and that He doesn't really love us enough to provide what we need. And from all this—this envy—we lose sight of our many causes for gratitude, our many blessings, His promises, those fulfilled and those still to come.

And isn't it true that nothing we come to possess satisfies for long. The appetite for what's next reemerges. Envy is not satisfied. In contrast, simplicity of life and gratitude (gratitude for who God has made me to be, for what I have, and my life's circumstances) are the keys to pushing away from the false god that is envy. You might say, "*Yeah that would be fine, if my circumstances weren't truly awful*", but I've known too many people who, objectively speaking, live very hard lives and even endure suffering, yet live in gratitude and joy. We can always find someone who has it better and others who have it worse.

The call to holiness, which is the call given to us all, demands that we fight against envy. The more we do—little by little—in place of nagging envy and the distorted perspective it brings, and further, the division it creates between us, just as it did Jesus' disciples. In saying, "*If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all*", Jesus sought to draw us out of ourselves, that no longer merely navel gazing, we might see something meaningful beyond our immediate appetites and distorted desires.

Only with intentional acknowledgement of how we are blessed and our causes for gratitude, will we find enduring satisfaction and the freedom Jesus came to restore within us.