

The Seven Deadly Sins

The Hook: How can I get a spiritual check-up?

This Episode will help you:

1. The purpose and meaning of the Seven Deadly Sins
2. Understand how the seven deadly sins are present in everyone's lives and how to overcome them with the right 'antidote.'

Key Points

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2. What's the 'logic' of the *Seven Deadly Sins*?

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 - 7.3. Marian 'antidote' to lust: *Mary's Virginity and Chastity*.

Optional: included "Practical Advice."

Optional: included "Paintings of the Scenes of the *Seven Terraces* from Dante's *Purgatory*."

Note: I know this outline is longer than ideal. But the reason for that is because this is a topic that there are many rich possibilities for, and so I tried to include different analogies and images that the writing team could use in explaining each of the Seven Deadly Sins. This is a topic where I think the team should have maximal liberty to be creative, since this is largely about using the imagination to foster spiritual growth. I provided more than necessary material in order to provide more ‘raw material’ for the team’s selectivity and creativity. This outline was largely inspired, and in many places repeats, a powerful presentation on the ‘Seven Deadly Sins’ offered by Bishop Robert Barron; nonetheless, I am confident that this outline will provide a fresh approach. Prior to publication of this outline on the website as a resource, I will provide appropriate citations and credits for all appropriations and references].

PART I. INTRODUCTION

1. WHAT ARE *THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS*?

Today, most of us are comfortable talking about what is wrong with us physically. For example, we feel comfortable going to a doctor when we feel ill, or that something isn’t right. “Hey, doc, this doesn’t feel right,” etc. And we go because we want to be healed, because we want to know if there is something that we’re doing that is putting us in a mortally dangerous situation. We’re very comfortable with this kind of things when it comes to our physical, bodily health.

By analogy, in the spiritual life, we should know that there are things and practices that we engage in which put our spiritual health in danger. What do I mean by “spiritual health”? Hans Urs von Balthasar once said that holiness is nothing more, but certainly nothing less, than enduring God’s glance. Now I want you to think about this for a moment. It may appear mere passivity to withstand the look of an eye; but everyone knows how much exertion is required when this occurs in a real, interpersonal encounter. In our day to day lives, our glances with others mostly brush by each other indirectly, or they turn quickly away, or they give themselves not personally, but only socially. So too do we constantly flee from God into a distance that is *theoretical, rhetorical, sentimental, aesthetic*, or, most frequently, *pious!* And yet the best thing would be to surrender one’s naked heart to the fire of this all-penetrating glance. The heart would then itself have to catch fire, if it were not always artificially dispersing the rays that come to it as through a magnifying glass. Such enduring would be a yielding, a declaring oneself beaten, a capitulating, an entrusting oneself, casting oneself into him. It would be—and this is the whole point—childlike loving, since for children the glance of the father is not painful: with wide-open eyes they look into his. Little Therese—great little Therese—could do it. It is only when we are transformed into love that we can bear the glance of the God, who is the Great Lover. Augustine has a magnificent formula that describes eternity: “*videntem videre*” – “to look at Him who is looking at you.”

The whole Christian life is a journey. It is a journey of transformation, of healing, of sifting out everything in us that thwarts the growth of love. The purpose of the *Seven Deadly Sins* is something like a spiritual “check-up.” They are ways of reflecting on wounds in our hearts that are thwarting the growth of love and which must be healed. The *Seven Deadly Sins*, therefore, do not refer to sins that we commit, but rather, to the sources of sin that are in our hearts. The traditional name for these sins were the Seven “Principle” or “Capital” Sins, from Latin, *caput*, meaning “head.”¹ These were understood to be the underlying “sources” of sins in our lives. In the tradition, authors commonly imagined these seven sins metaphorically as a tree, with pride as the common root, and the seven deadly sins as the main branches, and other sins as their offshoots and poisonous fruit. The organic metaphor emphasized identifying the ultimate source of sin in one’s heart and excising it at that level. The seven ‘capital’ sins are: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust.

2. WHAT’S THE ‘LOGIC’ OF THE *SEVEN DEADLY SINS*?

All of this is here is not necessary for an episode. But I am providing it because I want the team to understand why and how I'm presenting the seven deadly sins below. So, I would only include from this section what you think is minimally necessary for the understanding of the items that you take from the sections below (in Part II).

One of the most brilliant thinkers of all time, but especially with regard to the *Seven Deadly Sins* is Dante. His *Purgatorio* ('Purgatory')—the second part of his three part *Divine Comedy*—is an imaginative representation of the purification of the heart towards the fullness of love. Dante depicts a mountain with seven terraces, or levels, and each level corresponds to one of the seven deadly sins ("the seven roots of sinfulness"). Dante's arrangement in this text gives us a brilliant insight into the spiritual life. Why? Because think about this. Dante's whole *Divine Comedy* is set before the Last Judgment. Why is that important? Because he isn't making a claim about what heaven and hell will be like at the end of time, or at least, that's not the main point. He is claiming that depending on how you live, depending on how you love *now*, if you could see with spiritual eyes, this is where you would see yourself in the spiritual world. We get so caught up with the structures of the world around us that we sometimes forget that life, true life, is not about climbing ranks here, but about growing in love towards God, who is the Great Lover.

With this in mind, we gain four key insights from Dante's text:

- 2.1. First, in the *Purgatorio*, anyone can leave their circle (terrace) voluntarily. Their sin is what keeps them where they're at. As soon as they learn to overcome any of the seven deadly sins, and thus are able to love more truly and fully, then they freely move closer to *Paradiso*. No one is making you prideful. No one is keeping you envious. You keep yourself there so long as you don't heal that wound and grow in love.
- 2.2. Second, the seven 'terraces' or 'circles' are organized by their relation to love. So, we have the following pattern:
 - 2.2.1. The first three terraces of Purgatory relate to perverted love of a spiritual nature. These are the worse because they are deeper in us than others. They harden the heart closer to its root. These particularly thwart our love of God and neighbor because they are directed towards actual harm of others (Pride, Envy, and Anger).
 - 2.2.2. The fourth terrace relates to deficient love (Sloth). All love is passionate, and vested. Sloth is a lack of love.
 - 2.2.3. The last three terraces relates to excessive or disordered love of good things (Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust). These are forms of addiction to material things that do not let us receive them as gifts from God, and thus lead us to treat those pleasures and goods as 'ends' in themselves, rather than enjoying them for the greater glory of God.
In other words, the seven-story mountain—a name of one of Thomas Merton's masterpieces, and it comes from Dante's text—is about a *journey in the healing and growth of love*.
- 2.3. Third, Dante gives us an imaginative insight into what each of the seven deadly sins "look like" with spiritual eyes. Each of his depictions of the "punishments" that people receive are not punishments imposed from the outside by God. Rather, Dante follows Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in claiming that it is the "punishment of the sin itself"—something called *contrapasso* in Italian, from the Latin *contra* and *patior*, "to suffer the opposite." It means that God allows you to become what you love most, and you bear the marks of your love. If we could see the wounds in our heart with spiritual eyes, we would see the punishment itself. And he develops imaginative ways of presenting that to us.
- 2.4. Fourth, most importantly, at every 'terrace' of Mount Purgatory, Dante offers a scene of from the life of Mary in the Gospels that is the 'antidote' to that wound. Mary is *the* perfect model for the Christian life. She is what the Church strives to be, precisely because she embodied the perfection of love. She completely surrendered herself to God ('Let it be done unto my according to thy word,')

and shared in Christ's own mission, even to the point of having her heart pierced as she stood at the foot of the Cross. Thus, Dante is telling us, as we see the diagnosis of the problem (through the imaginative representation of the seven deadly sins), we should contemplate on the perfection of love in Mary, based on a particular scene in the Scriptures, which would let us heal that wound in us.

PART II. LET'S GO ON THIS JOURNEY THROUGH THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS.

1. **PRIDE**

Pride is the most deadly of the deadly sins. It is *the* capital sin—from the Latin, *caput*, meaning head. It is the *head* sin from which everything else flows. Pride is *the* problem.²

1.1. **Why? What is pride?** “Pride is arrogating to oneself the distinct prerogatives of God.” *I’m God.*

Now, of course, no one wakes up each day and says, hmm, today I want to be God. But think about this: when *I* determine the meaning of *my* life; *I* determine the meaning of the universe; *I* determine the meaning of human life. *I* determine the value that things have, what my life's purpose is.³ This is arrogating to one's self the unique prerogative of God – that's pride.⁴

1.2. **What's the problem with pride?** As Fr. Robert Barron pithily put it: “the problem with pride is that it's *boring*.” Why? Because when you arrogate to yourself the prerogatives of God, you've turned in on yourself. St Augustine put it beautifully: ‘*incurvatus in se*,’ that means ‘curved or caved in on oneself,’ ‘curved into oneself.’ I determine the meaning of my life, my projects, my plans, my intentions. ... my little world. I'm living this little space of my own egotistic plans. How wonderful it would be when you can break out of that “ego-drama” (*my* life, everything revolving around *my* ego) into what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls the *Theo-Drama*. The Theo-Drama is the drama that God is producing, that God is writing, that God is directing. You've got a role in this drama, but God is the producer, the director, and the writer. When you surrender to that, you find your role in the *Theo-Drama*. See, in the prideful person—all of us are prideful people—all of us lock ourselves into the narrow space of what we want. The ego-drama is self-enclosed. The *Theo-Drama* is the great, open, expansive space of what God intends for us. Surrender to Theo-Drama, now you're really beginning to live.⁵

1.3. *Two Analogies for Pride:*

1.3.1. Analogy 1: Image you're having a conversation with a friend, and you're just following the rhythm of the conversation. Together, you're exploring the truth, following along, enjoying the exuberance of that experience. It's almost as though the conversation is playing you. Now, contrast that to a conversation in which you're desperately interested in what the other person thinks of you, and whether you're making the right impression. What's happening is that you're not getting lost in the beauty of the conversation, you're not given over to the truth, you're turned in awkwardly and anxiously upon yourself. That's pride. Pride is when you're going through your whole life, and all you can worry about is the impression that you're making, what “they” think of you, and *it ends up divorcing you from reality. When you're lost in the conversation, you're in reality.*

1.3.2. Analogy 2: Imagine that you're traveling through the most beautiful country side on a bus, but you have the shades pulled down and you're fighting with someone else about who gets the first seat on the bus. All you can care about is how your ‘status’ in that bus. Forget about the first seat in the bus, and open the window and *look!* The ego-drama is when we close the ‘windows’ of our spirit to the world. John Paul II says that “the worst prison would be a closed heart.” The *Theo-Drama* is when we open the windows and look, and actually see reality, actually live it, actually open ourselves up to beauty that enraptures us and beholds us.

- 1.4. **The Antidote to pride: *humility*.** This is why the antidote to pride—the lively virtue—is humility. Now, we automatically think of false humility. That’s not what we mean here. *Humilitas* in Latin comes from the word *humus*, which means the earth, the ground. To be humble is not to be phony, or self-deprecating in a fake way; it means ‘close to reality,’ close to the earth or the ground. This is why in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, the prideful who are in the first ‘terrace’ of purgatory have to carry great boulders on their backs. You may think, oh they’re just being punished. No, you see, the boulder pushes them down, closer to the ground, to the earth, the *humus*, to reality. Stop thinking about what other people think of you, stop worrying about your reputation, about your ego-drama, and give yourself over to reality. And that’s humility, and that’s a source of joy, that’s where we encounter beauty, truth, and life; it’s where we encounter God’s plan for us.
- 1.5. **Marian ‘antidote’ for pride: ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.’** Dante provides us with a scene from Mary’s life that shows us what the antidote to pride is. He points us to the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. Imagine! Who is this woman that God should so favor her that he himself would be born of her?! If anyone could be prideful, it would be her. But what does she say? “Behold, I am the *handmaid* of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to thy word,” (Luke 1:38). Handmaid means servant. *That’s* humility.

2. ENVY

- 2.1. **What is envy?** Gore Vidal, the American novelist, is reputed to have said: “Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies.”⁶ Notice the *honesty*. Another version of this is the German *Schadenfraude* (from the Germa, *Schaden*, “damage, harm,” and *Freude*, “joy”), is when something bad happens, especially to a friend, and I rejoice. We could sum it up as: “When a friend of mine succeeds, or when a friend of mine is in trouble, and I get a kick out of it.” That’s envy. — We see this throughout the Bible, time and again. Cane jealous of Abel, Jacob jealous of Esau, brothers of Joseph jealous of Joseph, Saul jealous of David, the other disciples jealous of James and John, up and down the Bible, envy is a driving force of the biblical narrative. Look at it in literature and film, how often the narrative is driven by envy. Now, look at our own little soap boxes, our ego-dramas, how often they’re driven by the engine of envy. — Envy is a daughter of pride. If I’m not worried about who is first in the bus, I’m not envious. If I just have the window open, I’m taking in the world. If I’m like a child, and finding wonder and joy in the world, in reality, then I’m not worried about what other people are doing or not doing.
- 2.2. **The Antidote to Envy: *Admiration*.** There’s nothing that we have that we have not been given. St Paul tells us: “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7b-c). What do you have that you have not been given? Your talents? A gift from God. Your body, your passion, your mind, your creativity, your energy — all of it is a gift from God. So, why do you get hung up on what you have, what he doesn’t have, and so forth. *All of it is a gift*. So the proper response is to admire and give thanks for that gift, whether it comes to another or to you. We should admire the good wherever we find it, precisely because “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17).⁷ — When we turn to Dante, we get a keen insight. The envious, who are at the second level of the mountain, have their eyelids sewn shut with metal wiring. Why? Because they spend their whole lives *looking, looking*: Who is better than I am? Who has more than I am? That’s envy. They look, but they miss the beauty of God’s gift, and so, they don’t really “see.”
- 2.3. **Marian ‘antidote’ for envy: *The Wedding at Cana*.** At the Wedding Feast at Cana, Mary did not rejoice at the fact that the newlyweds ran out of wine. Could you imagine how we’d react? “Ha, those idiots. My wedding was so much better. I can’t wait to tell my friends about this.” Instead, she points to Jesus, and intercedes on behalf of the newlyweds for him to help them in their loss, since Jesus alone fulfills everyone’s deepest needs (cf. John 2:1-12).

3. ANGER

- 3.1. **What is anger?** We might think this doesn't apply to us.⁸ But we need to look a bit deeper. Thomas Aquinas defines it as: "Anger is a passion for revenge that goes beyond the control of reason." So, someone hurts you, and I now have a desire to get back that goes beyond all reason. That's anger in the sense of the deadly sin. It can happen at the personal level (between persons); at the family level (think of family feuds that keep divisions because of anger passed down); at the geopolitical level (think of anger between countries, still seeking revenge, etc.). Think about anyone or any people who are alienated from you; think of relationships that are broken, and that the distance is a form of estrangement brought about by hardened anger. That's what we're talking about.
- 3.2. **The antidote to anger: forgiveness.** Forgiveness is central to the teachings of Jesus: "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mark 11:25; cf. Matt 6:14-15). It's central to the *Our Father* prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us*" (Matt 6:12). And most powerfully, when he was crucified to the Cross, left to die in agonizing pain and abandonment – from that place, he said: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). The Risen Jesus returns to his disciples — those who had denied him, abandoned him, in his moment of need — he says, "Peace be with you!" (cf. Jn 20:19, etc.) — So, what is forgiveness? *Forgiveness means bearing another person's burden.* Think about this. Two people become separated for whatever reason. *In justice*, I do my part, you do your part, and we meet in the middle; we are reconciled. But let's say I do my part, but you keep running. Forgiveness is bearing that person's burden. It's going the extra mile that he won't go. It's bearing the part that they should bear in justice, but which they won't bear. And we go that extra mile because God has gone that extra mile for us. Paul tells us: "Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col 3:13). — Here, again, we see the significance of Dante's depiction of the *wrathful* or the *angry* in the third terrace of purgatory. They walk around in acrid smoke, which symbolizes the blinding effect of anger. The black smoke consumes them, like anger does, and it makes them blinded, and it makes them huff and puff, without being able to communicate, severing all true and peaceful relations, and thus severing love. The smoke reveals to them the way that anger consumes them, and how forgiveness gives brings them back to reality, it lets them "see." Those who are in purgatory are there precisely out of the *love* that God has for them, a love that forgave them even when they didn't deserve it "in justice." They must live out of that reality, and not let the smoke of anger blind them and break down the bonds of love.
- 3.3. **Marian 'antidote' for anger: Finding Jesus in the Temple.** Dante shows how a vision of Mary appears in the third terrace of purgatory that shows the scene of Mary, anxious and with tears flowing, looking for Jesus. Most parents would be angry if their twelve-year-old kid disappeared for three days without giving any consideration to how that would worry them. What's worse: parents would become even more upset if, after finding the child, he expressed no remorse for worrying his parents, but felt justified in what he did! But here, we see the gentleness of Mary; she does not become enraged, but she "kept all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:51).

4. SLOTH (ACEDIA)

- 4.1. **What is sloth (acedia)?** Sloth—or, historically, *acedia*, from the Greek meaning 'negligence' of spiritual things—is perhaps the most foreign for people in today's society and yet it is *the* most crucial deadly sin for today. Thomas Aquinas' tells us that "*sloth is sorrow for spiritual good.*" See, you can be the most energetic person in the world, a go-getter, the CEO of a Forbes Fortune 500 company. Your appointment calendar can be filled, and *yet* you can be filled with sloth at the same time. It's sorrow, or depression, with regard to the spiritual life. It's a when spiritual things are ...

heh, shrug my shoulders, yawn. It's a kind of boredom of the soul. At the level of the soul, sloth means that there's a torpor or boredom.

- 4.2. **The unique relevance of sloth (acedia) for today's society.** Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian of the 20th century, said that *the* distinctive sin of our time is sloth. There's a lot of truth to that. Our age is an age of secularism. You see, secularism is full of energy: we build buildings, cities, technology, but when it comes to spiritual things, it's a time of boredom, indifference, a "whatever" culture. Benedict XVI was so strong against the dangers of relativism — or, we should say, today's *dictatorship* of relativism. What's relativism? It's the *meh, shrug-my-shoulders* culture. The *whatever* culture. "You got your values, I got mine." "What's true for you is not true for me." You see, that's an acceptable approach *only to things you don't care about, things you're indifferent about*. No one who takes anything serious would ever be that way about something. Imagine telling someone who camps out in front of an oil refinery plant for months in peaceful protest against environmental abuse that *meh, it doesn't matter*. Imagine telling someone who is involved in the conflicts in many Middle Eastern countries, where the fate of people's freedom, human rights, and so many other things hang in the balance, *meh, it doesn't matter*. You see, you suddenly realize: we can only be that way about things that we don't take serious. Relativism and secularism are a state in which we don't take spiritual things serious, and thus relegate them to the domain of indifference.
- 4.3. **The antidote to sloth: mission.** John Henry Newman gave a keen insight. What gives a river its energy? Newman says it's the firmness of its banks ("well-defined banks"). If a river has firm banks, it moves. It goes. It has a purpose. What happens if you knock down the banks? The river will then open up into a big, lazy lake. That's an analogy, that's an image for what is going on in our society spiritually. What have knocked down the banks of what's Good, what's True, what's Beautiful, and the river has opened up into a lazy lake, and we're floating around on private little floats, trying to tolerate each other. That's today's world. So, how do we deal with this? The antidote is *the zeal of having a mission*. Mission is from the Latin, *missere*, "to send." Jesus describes his *whole life* as a mission; his existence in the world is the unfolding of his mission. Jesus describes his whole life as coming "from above" (Jn 4:31), "from heaven" (Jn 4:32), "from the Father" (Jn 16:28), and he enters into the depths of the earth and of human experience, by becoming the Son of Man (Jn 8:28; Mark 10:33); and this is done in order to return from these depths to the place of the Father, when his mission of proclaiming and sharing the Father's love for the world is accomplished (Jn 3:13; 6:32; 16:27ff.; Cf. 1:51; 16:28). What does this mean to us? To encounter the God of Jesus Christ is to be given a share in his mission of love. There is *no one* in the bible who was given an experience of God without being at the same time "sent," that is, endowed with a *mission*. Think about Abraham, Jacob, Joshua, Moses, David, Samuel, Saul (Paul), Peter, James, John, and so forth. Balthasar, who we mentioned earlier, actually shows how you don't know who you are until you've received your mission. Mission is tied to person. It is only when I receive a special share in God's mission of love in the world that I am given a *name*, a name by God, a name that is unique because it shares in Christ's own Infinite Uniqueness. As John Henry Newman says: "I am created to do or to be something for which no one else is created: I have a place in God's counsels, in God's world, which no one else has. Whether I be rich or poor, despised or esteemed by man, God knows me and calls me by my name."⁹
- 4.4. **Marian 'antidote' to sloth: The Visitation.** In Dante, sloth is depicted as a soul that is deficient of love; they have failed in life to act in pursuit of love. And so they are depicted as having to 'run around,' having to learn to make haste, because they have been too spiritually lazy to love. The scene from the Virgin's life is when Mary "*makes haste*" to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She had just been given a mission from God (she will conceive "the Son of the Most High," Lk 1:32) and she sets off "in haste" (Lk. 1:39).

5. **AVARICE**

- 5.1. ***What's avarice?*** Thomas Aquinas' description: "It's the unreasonable or immoderate desire for riches." We're allowed to own private property. There's nothing wrong with wealth in itself. But when it becomes unreasonable or immoderate, we have the deadly sin of avarice. You might describe this as the "greedy attachment to material things." Here's an image: most of us think that we're unhappy because we're missing something. Mind you, we're all unhappy. I don't mean depressed. But what I mean is that we're all hungry, we all have desire. That's echoing St Augustine: "Lord, my heart is *restless* until it rests in you." We see this notably with famous people who all the riches, sex, and pleasures in the world, and they're still unhappy. Most of us think that we have something missing that we need to fill up. I don't have enough riches, I don't have enough pleasure, I don't have enough power ... that's why I'm unhappy. If only I could have this, if only I could have that, *then* I would be able to fill up the cage of my ego.
- 5.2. ***The antidote to avarice: generosity.*** The supreme paradox of Christianity is that what alone fills you is not throwing things into the empty cage, but rather giving your life away in love. That's what fills you. But why? Because that's who God is. God gives himself away. God is the eternal self-giving generosity of love in himself. The Father gives himself fully to the Son; the Son, receiving the Father's gift of himself, gives himself in return to the Father. The Holy Spirit comes forth from this mutual self-gift as the fruit and witness to God's love and gift in his eternal life. So, when we give ourselves away in imitation, we are filled with the divine life. This is the paradox that Christians stake their whole life on. John Paul II says that your being increases in the measure that you give it away.¹⁰ Vatican II says: "Man finds himself only by making himself a sincere gift to others" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24).
- 5.3. ***Marian 'antidote' to avarice: the Nativity.*** Dante shows the avaricious as laying face down on the ground, unable to move. Why? Because they have chosen to love earthly things over God; they have made the ground their God, and thus, they are shown facing the object of their love. The Marian scene that shows the antidote is the humble birth of Christ. God, who himself is the source of all power and wealth, emptied himself of his power and riches, and became poor for us. Behold the *humility of God*! And the humility of his handmaid, Mary, who brought forth our Lord and God in the poverty of a manger! Paul tells us: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).

6. **GLUTTONY**

- 6.1. ***What is gluttony?*** Gluttony is similar to avarice insofar as it is an attachment to a material thing in a way that disfigures our love. Thomas Aquinas defines gluttony as "an immoderate or unreasonable pleasure in food and drink." It's a type of pleasure that tries to fill a space that God is supposed to fill. If only I had more pleasure in my life, I'll be happy. Now, remember something. Catholics aren't against the pleasures of food, drink, sex, and so forth. God made these things pleasing, but not as pleasures to be loved as their own end, but so that we would give him thanks and praise for making a creation that echoes his own goodness. Augustine's famous line: "Lord, you have made us for yourself" (*Conf.*, I.1.1). We should think of all desire as something like a sacrament for tasting God's own goodness. Thomas Merton, the great 20th century spiritual master, said that the desires of the flesh (i.e., avarice, gluttony, and lust) are a bit like little children. Little kids want what they want, when they want, and how they want. And if not, they pitch a fit. If you indulge a kid's every want, they'll soon run your whole life. So, Merton tells us, that the desire for food, drink, and sensual pleasure can be something like that. And if we don't discipline it, they will soon be running "the house" of our lives. That's the problem with gluttony: it ends up running my life to the point where I've forgotten about my mission, prayer, love.

- 6.2. ***The antidote to gluttony: asceticism.*** Asceticism means denying oneself food, drink, and sensual pleasure, for the sake of focusing spiritual healing and growth. It's about letting the pleasures of life not take over us, but about letting us taste those pleasures as 'little tastes' of God's own goodness, which alone fulfills us and gives us true joy. So, asceticism is not trying to escape from bodily things, or pleasures; the body and all of creation is good. But, it is a limit from sensual pleasure, taken on for a time, to awaken and focus spiritual desire. It's a way of affirming the world's goodness must point to God.
- 6.3. ***Marian 'antidote' to gluttony: Mary's sharing the Fruit of her Womb.*** In Dante's *Purgatorio*, the gluttonous are slowly starved as they reach up to trees whose fruit is forever out of reach. And, in the background, one hears the prayer: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (Psalm 51:15). The point is that they will realize that their lips have been handed over to seeking their own pleasures, rather than praising God for the pleasures they received. They're forced to reach up, and cannot reach the fruits, but in doing so, they are forced to look upwards to Him who is the source of every fruit. Dante presents us then with the Marian antidote: Mary, who shared her Son's gift with others at the Wedding of Cana, and by extension, with the whole world. She is the one who offers the fruit of her womb for all, and praises God for it. (Dante also shows John the Baptist, who lived only on locusts and honey [Matt 3:4], as an example of one whose love of God exceeded his love for any worldly pleasure).

7. LUST

- 7.1. ***What is lust?*** Alas, we have arrived at the only thing that people tend to think about when we say the word "sin"! Ha! So, what is lust? Lust does not mean the Church is anti-sex. The Catholic tradition reverences sex, including sexual pleasure. Nothing in the world wrong with it. In fact, that's why Catholicism protects it so carefully. People so often see the Church as somewhat "sex-obsessed." Why are there so many rules around sex? Well, in some way, there's some truth to that. There are so many "rules" around it precisely because it's so beautiful, so precious, that the Church wants to protect it. Why are there so many security protocols and procedures to access diamonds at a bank vault? Because they're valuable, because they mean something, because they're precious. You see, lust is not sexual desire, it's a *distortion of sexual desire*. It's defined easily: "the use of another human being as a means to your own sexual end." We should never "use" another human being for our own sexual ends. They can never be reduced to a "means" for your pleasure. That's lust.
- 7.2. ***Antidote to Lust: Chastity.*** Chastity is an upright (i.e., morally correct) expression of one's sexuality. No matter what your form of life is (i.e., married, single, religious life), we are all called to be chaste. (Do not confuse chastity with celibacy!). Chastity is an expression of sexuality that always involves the profound respect of the other. That's the heart of chastity. It's seeing the other person as truly other. My body cannot be divorced from who I am; rather, my body should be the way that I express the gift of myself to another. The human body contains within itself "the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift—and by means of this gift—fulfills the meaning of his being and existence" (John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, Jan 16, 1980; p. 63).
- 7.3. ***Marian 'antidote' to lust: Mary's Virginity and Chastity.*** Dante gives us one of the most brilliant insights into lust. You see, most of the time, people think of lust as a 'burning desire,' and that someone has to 'put the flame out.' No, no, no. You see, that's all wrong! The problem with lust is that it *keeps* you from *truly being set on fire by love*. The lustful are seen in Dante as having to go through an immense wall of flame, singing the hymn *Summae Deus Clementiae* ("God of Supreme Clemency"). The lustful then call forth in praise of chastity and marital fidelity as they walk through the immense wall of flame. Dante has the Virgin Mary present before all as a model of true love, of someone whose body is so united with her love that she preserves the fire of her love in her chastity and virginity. You see, chastity and married fidelity is when a lover is so consumed by fire that he or she

has nothing left but that fire. For someone to be unfaithful, to lust after someone else, etc., they must not be entirely enflamed in their love; they must be holding something back. It's only when we are set entirely on fire by love—a true love which only God can give—that we can truly love God and can truly love ourselves and others.

[OPTIONAL: PRACTICAL ADVICE]

1. **PRIDE: Practical Advice to overcome pride with humility.**
 - 1.1. Intentionally take a lesser place
 - 1.2. Redirect attention away from yourself and give it to someone else
 - 1.3. Learn to enjoy simple things. Surrender to simple things and find joy in them. Just watch a little child discovering something for the first time. They have *wonder*.¹¹ They give themselves over to it. Try to be like them.
2. **ENVY: Practical Advice to overcome envy with admiration.**
 - 2.1. Go out of your way to genuinely praise somebody you're envious of.
 - 2.2. Simply stop the unhelpful practice of comparing.
3. **ANGER: Practical advice to overcome anger with forgiveness.**
 - 3.1. Take a concrete step towards healing a broken relationship.
 - 3.2. When you are offended or hurt, don't let it simmer or fester. Forgive quickly. Don't let it harden into a broken relationship or alienation. Paul tells us: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (Eph 4:26-27). Why does this make room for the devil? Because that anger will stiffen our tender hearts, not allowing us to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us (Eph 4:32).
 - 3.3. Refrain from gossip and talking about people behind their back. You see, when someone hurts you, of course it's easier to talk behind their backs. It's a way of 'poking' at them without confronting them in a constructive and reconciling way. Paul tells us: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29). How can we implement this in a realistic way? Here's a good 'rule of thumb': Criticize someone only in the measure that you are willing to help him or her deal with the problem that you are raising. If you are 100% committed to helping the person deal with the problem you're raising, then critique till the cows come home. But if you are unwilling to help them deal with it, then keep your mouth shut. That should be the rule.
 - 3.4. Always keep before your heart and mind Jesus' words on the Cross: "Father, forgive them" (Lk 23:34).
4. **SLOTH: Practical advice on how to overcome sloth with mission.**
 - 4.1. Work on discerning and refining your sense of mission. A mission has been placed in every baptized person. How do we discern our mission? As with Mary, it is only when we give ourselves completely to God ("Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to they word," Lk 1:38) that we receive our mission, that we are given a unique share in Christ's own mission ("Mary set out

and went with haste,” Lk 1:39). Surrender yourself to God and his plan for you, and you will begin to hear your mission more clearly.

- 4.2. Dorothy Day once said that everything a baptized person does every day should be related to the corporal or spiritual works of mercy (*Corporal works of mercy*: feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; shelter the homeless; visit the sick; visit the prisoners; bury the dead; give alms to the poor; *the spiritual works of mercy*: counseling the doubtful; instructing the ignorant; admonishing the sinner; comforting the sorrowful; forgiving injuries; bearing wrongs patiently; praying for the living and the dead). Your mission will be tied, somehow, to these works of mercy, whatever it is. Whichever one (or more) of those stir up your sense of mission might help you discern your mission more clearly.

5. **AVARICE: Practical advice on how to overcome avarice with generosity.**

- 5.1. Give something away. Go into your closet, into a drawer, wherever, and give something away. Dorothy day, resounding the insights of the Fathers of the Church, said: “If you got two shirts in your closet, one belongs to you. The other belongs to the man who has no shirt.”¹² Pope Leo XII in *Rerum Novarum*, the founding document of the Church’s social teaching, tells us that once the demands of necessity and propriety have been met in your life, everything else you own belongs to the poor.¹³ It may be a good idea to keep a ‘poor box’ by your front door, so that when you enter and leave your home, you can remember the poor, and drop things in that box for the poor. In this way, they will always be with you.
- 5.2. Tithing is an ancient biblical practice. Of the entire gift that God has given you, he asks for 10% in return, in order to support the proper thanks and praise for his love and to help others for whom he also gave his blood.

6. **GLUTTONY: Practical advice on how to overcome gluttony with asceticism**

- 6.1. Skip a lunch one day in the coming weeks, and spend the hour in prayer that you would’ve spent eating, and give the money you would have spent to the poor.
- 6.2. Frequent the Eucharist. The truest pleasure in this life is the Eucharist, in which we taste and receive God’s self-gift to us in the form of bread and wine. In this bread and wine, we encounter and receive Him who is the source of every pleasure and delight!

7. **LUST: Practical advice on how to overcome lust with chastity.**

- 7.1. Get rid of any pornography. Pornography is institutionalized lust, precisely because in porn, the body is reduced to an object used for one’s gratification, not as an authentic way of expressing love and of becoming a gift.
- 7.2. Try to get your body and heart in sync. See everything that you do with your body as an expression of your spirit. Let your body reflect your spirit. Let your body be the reflection of your heart’s deepest love. Only when your body and spirit are one can you experience true intimacy and experience yourself and others as gift.

[OPTIONAL: PAINTINGS OF THE SCENES FROM DANTE’S PURGATORY]

<http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/purgatory/>

[ADDITIONAL NOTES]

¹ The term “principle vices” was used early on (John Cassian’s *Conferences*, 5) and was further explained in Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job*.

² As Catholics, when we talk about sin or vice, we probably tend to think about sexual sin, lust. But if we look at Dante, for example, lust is the least significant of the seven. Don’t mistake me, lust is still a deadly sin, but it is the least significant. The most significant is pride, and the great masters of spirituality in the Christian tradition would agree with this.

³ Even if I were to establish some seemingly noble purpose, like: the purpose of my life is to be nice, or the purpose of my life is family, insofar as *I* determine the purpose of my life, insofar as *I* decide what is the ultimate good, I am placing myself in the place of God. I’m saying that *I* determine what the Good is.

⁴ How is that expressed in the beautiful language of Genesis? They grasp at the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Who alone has this distinctive and grounding knowledge of Good and Evil? Well, that’s God. When God ceased that prerogative for themselves, they commit this great sin of pride. Pride is grasping at divinity for ourselves.

⁵ Cf. Paul’s saying that In Ephesians, Paul says: “There’s a power already in work in you that can do infinitely more than you can imagine.” What’s the power? It’s the Holy Spirit. And he can do so much more than you can ask or imagine within the confines of your ego-drama. Break out. Open yourself up to the Holy Spirit. That’s overcoming pride. Now, you can see

⁶ 2007 Summer, The Paris Review, Number 181, Interview: Norman Mailer, The Art of Fiction No. 193, Interviewed by Andrew O’Hagan, Paris Review, Inc., Flushing, New York. (Online archive of The Paris Review at theparisreview.org; accessed September 11, 2014). Link: <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5775/norman-mailer-the-art-of-fiction-no-193-norman-mailer>

⁷ The problem is when people take the attitude of: “I got this coming to me. I deserve this. It’s my hard work.” Yeah, but who gave you the capacity for hard work? It’s my intellectual achievement. Yeah, but who gave you your mind, sustains your mind and animates you every second? *It’s God*. Once you let that truth sink in, you stop playing the game of envy.

⁸ Now, there are two types of anger, spiritually speaking. There is a good anger, something that we could call ‘righteous indignation,’ which is an anger against the violence of injustice. Jesus’ anger in the temple, the anger of a Martin Luther King, Jr, of a Dorothy Day, angry at the violence of injustice. There’s nothing wrong with that — that’s a *righteous indignation*. That’s a good thing. It means that the person is passionate about justice, and thus not slothful (deadly sin number 4).

⁹ John Henry Newman, *Part III. Meditations on Christian Doctrine with a Visit to the Blessed Sacrament Before Meditation. Meditation on Christian Doctrine. I. Hope in God—Creator*. “Entry for March 7, 1848,” §2. (Can also be found on page 299 in the Newman Reader).

¹⁰ John Paul II calls this the ‘law of *ekstasis*’ or the ‘law of self-giving’: The lover ‘goes outside’ the self to find a fuller existence in another” (John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 126.

¹¹ John Paul II: “Without wonder, men and women would lapse into deadening routine and little by little would become incapable of a life which is genuinely personal.”

¹² Cf. St Basil the Great (AD 329-379): “When someone steals a man’s clothes we call him a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry man; the coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the man who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the man who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor” (*Homily on Luke*). — Or, for a more intense depiction of the dangers of greed as a form of neglecting the poor, we can look at Ambrose’s famous *De Nabuthe Jezraelita* (ca, AD 386-389), which was a commentary on 1 Kings 21, Naboth’s vineyard; he compared wealth landowners to Ahab, for they forced the poor from the land as Naboth had been ousted. He writes: “You cover walls, but you leave men bare. Naked they carry out before your house, and you heed them not: a naked man cries out, but you are busy considering what sort of marble you will have to cover your floors. A poor man asks for money, and does not get it; a human being begs for bread, and your horse champs a golden bit. You gratify

yourself with costly ornaments, while other men go without food. How great a judgment, O rich man, do you draw down upon yourself! The people go hungry, and you close your granaries; the people weep, and you turn your finger-ring about. Unhappy man, who have the power but not the will to save so many souls from death: the cost of the jewel in your ring would have sufficed to save the lives of a whole people.”

¹³ Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum*: “Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need. Whence the Apostle with, ‘Command the rich of this world... to offer with no stint, to apportion largely.’” True, no one is commanded to distribute to others that which is required for his own needs and those of his household; nor even to give away what is reasonably required to keep up becomingly his condition in life, “for no one ought to live other than becomingly.” *But, when what necessity demands has been supplied, and one’s standing fairly taken thought for, it becomes a duty to give to the indigent out of what remains over. “Of that which remaineth, give alms”* (§45).