

Seven Deadly Sins

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A definition of sin offered by Richard Holloway (one-time Presiding Bishop of Scotland) is "a wrongly directed effort; a good drive that fails to find the right object; a good thing in itself that is done to excess." (*Seven to Flee, Seven to Follow*, 1986). This fits Newman's understanding that, "Evil has no substance of its own, but is only the defect, excess, perversion, or corruption of that which has substance." Martin Smith, in his book on reconciliation, urges, "Fix your mind on the positive virtues, of which sins are the shadow." In a related understanding, Martin Thornton viewed the purpose of self-examination as aiming at "tranquillitas; not the suppression of desire, not apatheia, but harmony between the elements of personality." So, in all this we are dealing with health and wholeness rather than simply avoidance and self-protection. In some of the material below I'm drawing on Holloway's work.

Pride. Self esteem raised to an inordinate level, so that all sense of proportion is lost

Envy [jealousy]. "Sorrow for another's good," "Satisfaction at the misfortunes of our friends." A characteristic of envy is that it offers no real pleasure, it is without fun; other sins offer some gratification. Symptoms include malice, being good at noticing the defects in others, hypocrisy, dejection. Envy may lead into the third sin.

Covetousness [avarice]. "Itching hunger for the good things of life" (success, possessions, popularity). It shows itself in conspicuous consumption of things or people, fear of aging. [Note: pride and envy are rooted in a sense of inadequacy. There is in us a "deep longing to be accepted and appreciated; the need is to know that we are loved as we are."]

Anger. A disproportionate response to danger; phases that are destructive—impatience, retaliation, lack of control, resentment. The antidotes are to give ourselves to systematically willing another person's good and to act quickly as anger breaks out to minimize the damage.

Lust. A distorted instinct that is good in itself. It is rooted in a pursuit of pleasure that gives permission for exploitation, even if mutually agreed upon. There is a danger of moving into an addictive cycle and diminishing one's capacity for committed, joyful relationships. C.S. Lewis saw this as the least significant of the sins.

Gluttony. Much the same as the above in its dynamics. The person is driven to a pursuit of satisfying appetites—too much drink, food, smoking, talk; compulsive behavior. They are natural instincts that are allowed to play a disproportionate role and can end up dominating the personality. An approach to lust and gluttony is learning self discipline and redirect the instincts toward "the good."

Sloth. "The instinct for rest and creative idling taken and distorted into an unattractive passivity," "everything is too much trouble." It is a disease of the will, it numbs the will. Instead of taking our life in our own hand we drift along, not really being bad people [we don't have the energy for it]. Sloth does create the conditions under which evil takes hold in society. It may be related to why people seem to resist "giving themselves" to another, to their work, and to civic life.