

Capital Sins
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Phi 2:1-11; Mt 21:28-32)

The seven Capital Sins (or Deadly Sins) are: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Gluttony, Avarice, and Lust. We need to understand these sins in order to deepen our spiritual conversion.

When we prepare for first confession as children, we learn the Ten Commandments of the moral law, which are the first stage of conversion. They describe the path of righteousness that leads to eternal life, by proscribing actions which kill grace (i.e., mortal sins). Our examination of conscience must always begin with the Ten Commandments, because sins are violations of a divine law.

But as we grow older and our discipleship matures, our examination needs to focus more on the Capital Sins, which are the “sins behind the sins.” They are the deep, stubborn underlying tendencies in our fallen human nature to love the wrong things. They are the reason we commit other sins. Very often we are not even aware of them, yet they are the real problem.

For example, let’s say we commit the sin of missing Sunday Mass through our own fault, which is a violation of the third Commandment, and confess this sin in the sacrament of Penance. But what about the capital sin? What was the deeper sin behind that sin? Did I miss Mass due to Sloth, which indicates that my love for God is weak or superficial (i.e., spiritual “laziness”)? Or was it due to Pride, in that I retained control over my schedule and priorities, determining for myself what I wanted to do with my Sunday? Or was it due to Anger, something being held against God or neighbor that prevented me from praying?

Thus when we make our examination of conscience in preparation for the sacrament of confession, we need to pay attention not only to the sins we have committed in violation of the Ten Commandments. More importantly, we need to look to the “sins behind the sins.” God can absolve and forgive the sins we commit, but how is that going to *change us*, and guarantee we won’t go out and do the same thing again? Only when we dig into the deeper root-causes of sin in our soul and bring these to the healing grace of confession, and accept in our lives the purifying penances that are needed to heal us, will we begin to change.

Even though someone may die reconciled to God and man through Baptism and Penance/Confession – with all their mortal sins forgiven – it does not mean they can go directly to heaven. They still have to address those underlying tendencies to sin in the soul, those “wounds” in human nature which go back to the Fall. These require purification and healing one way or another. “Purgatory” is

especially focused upon these sins; its holy fire burns them away so that the soul is completely free and unburdened, holy and pure.¹

The teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, and St. Paul in his letters, focus more upon purifying the Capital Sins, than merely obeying the Law. For instance, two Sundays ago when Jesus told Peter he needed to forgive absolutely, it was in order to overcome the deadly sin of Anger which holds grudges and seeks revenge. Last Sunday in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, the last were paid as much as the first in order to highlight the deadly sin of Envy, which causes unnecessary resentment and hatred, and withdraws us from God's generous spirit.

Today's Parable of the Disobedient Son points to the deadly sin of Pride, which is manifested above all in disobedience. Pride is the embrace of one's own will, and the refusal to submit to another's. Pride is the disobedience in us that wants to do what we want to do, instead of what someone tells us. We say "no" to God, "I will not." Pride is the first capital sin, and the deadliest. It is the first sin ever committed – by Lucifer, who was the greatest of all the angels, the highest and first-born of all creatures;² and by Adam and Eve, who wanted to be their own gods deciding for themselves right and wrong. It is also the first sin of every small child, among whose earliest learned words is "No!"

The sin of pride is the one by which we exalt ourselves, and thus it is also called "vainglory," or simply "vanity." There is in pride a narcissistic deception. Instead of seeing oneself truly, by looking to God and others, the prideful person sees himself by looking only to himself, blind to God and others. It is why pride leads some people to become so preoccupied with their appearance, how they look, and why they become so upset when something about themselves is not "perfect."

By pride we make ourselves our own god, and "define" who others are in relation to ourselves, beginning with God. Pride causes idolatry. That is, it prevents us from worshipping the true God. Instead, we worship "God" as we want Him to be, as we think He should be. What the prideful person thinks is God, is actually only his self-idealization, his idealized self-projection. Thus, because of pride, we worship a false image of God, an idol we ourselves have made.

Likewise with regard to our neighbor, instead of loving our fellow man "as he is," we love what we imagine him to be according to our own self image, or want him to be. We place other people into categories of our own making. And

¹ In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante depicts the first stage of conversion, focusing on the Ten Commandments, in the *Inferno*. The second stage of conversion, focusing on the Capital Sins, is depicted in the *Purgatorio*.

² The devil's motto is "*non serviam*," "I will not serve!"

always, without realizing, we *have made ourselves more important*. Pride is selfishness, self-centeredness.

In the Gospel Jesus highlights the prideful deception of the Pharisees and elders, who imagine themselves to be holy and not in need of the repentance John preached. Like the son who said “yes,” they think they are pleasing God, yet *in fact* they are not doing God’s will. Pride blinds them to their fault.

Pride is the worst of all sins, because it is the most serious, and the most deceptive and hidden. Pride’s favorite mask is “humility!” The greatest pride masquerades as the greatest holiness. When you think you are holy and righteous, obedient and pleasing to God, you are actually woefully lost. When you think you are humble, or when you are *trying to be humble*, you are actually committing the sin of lucifer! Because if you were truly humble, you wouldn’t be thinking about pride or humility or yourself at all! Humility is literally, self-forgetfulness.

Today’s second reading, from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, is the most beautiful passage in all the Bible regarding Humility, which is the antidote of Pride. He urges Christians to cultivate humility by habitually considering others as more important than themselves, and their needs as more pressing than theirs: “*Do nothing out of pride or vainglory. Rather, humbly regard others as superior to yourselves, each of you looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.*”

And then he sets before them the example of Christ, in the beautiful hymn of Christ’s exaltation: “*Have among yourselves the attitude of Christ...*” Though he was the very form and identity of God (as the second Person of the Trinity), Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Instead, he did what Lucifer would never do: he *emptied himself* of all glory in order to become man. Jesus “lowered” himself to the level of man, and went even further: he took on the form of a slave, who would sacrifice himself for man. All of this was in perfect *obedience* to the will of the Father, expressed in his sacrificial death on the Cross.

Whereas Lucifer sought to exalt himself, deeming equality with God something to be grasped, for which he was “cast down” to be trampled by man into the dirt and cursed; Jesus by his humility was “raised up” and exalted to the right hand of the Father, to be blessed above every Name. God raises the humble.

When thinking of Christ, and what took place in the Incarnation, it is shocking to realize how *humble* God is! Though He is the supreme Creator with all power and glory, He deems His creature more important than Himself, He puts Himself in service to the creature, God will give His life for the creature. It was this humility of God that Lucifer found so repugnant, and why he thought he was more truly “God” than God was.

Humility is “self-forgetfulness.” It’s not about me! The fulfillment of the “self” is found outwardly, in charity, not inwardly in narcissism/selfishness. The humble, says St. Paul, should be united in seeking the common good, not personal good; and the harmony of will which results from submission/obedience.

Pride is a very scary sin to think about, because it is so difficult to detect. Jesus confronts the self-righteous Pharisees with their lack of humility, by showing how the tax collectors and prostitutes are much more spiritually advanced than they. They didn’t think they had sins, or couldn’t see any big sins. Yet they were the biggest devils of all: the vilest, most corrupt, most hypocritical and ungodly people Jesus ever encountered. He called them white-washed tombs that look good on the outside but inside were filled with decay and corruption.

More important than the sins we need to confess then, are the “sins behind the sins.” As we seek to follow the Lord, it is not sufficient merely to keep the law, content to avoid breaking any of the commandments. Even that can be – very likely is – a terrible sin.