

Your Guide To The 7 Deadly Sins—And The Virtues That Crush Them

Catholic or not, most people have heard of “The Seven Deadly Sins.”

But what are these seven sins, and why are they “deadly”? What can we do to make ourselves more aware of them and counteract them?

A **brief introduction** to these sins and their opposing virtues will get us started. Our good friend St. Thomas Aquinas will help us out along the way.

Meet the “Seven Deadlies”

One brief point must be made to properly understand the Deadly Sins: **they are not the seven “worst” sins per se.**

They are, rather, the seven human vices from which all individual sins spring. As St. Thomas says, “The capital vices are those which give rise to others, especially by way of final cause” (Summa I-II 84:4).

1. Pride

The first sin

First things first.

Pride, according to the Book of Sirach (10:15) and St. Thomas’s discussion of the matter (II-II:162:7), is **the root of all sin**, and it certainly does have—uh—pride of place among the Deadly Seven.

Pride is **the act of placing oneself on a higher pedestal than one deserves** and—in its worst forms—on a higher pedestal than God.

Pride was the first sin ever committed. It entered the universe when a certain high-ranking angel named Lucifer decided that being second to God just wasn’t enough and declared, “*Non serviam.*” “I will not serve.” It changed the course of history forever.

Lucifer’s name means “light-bearer” and he was the greatest creature God ever created, second in glory only to Him. Yet he threw it all away. Unbelievable, isn’t it? **Pride has that power.**

Pride was the first *human* sin, too. At the prompting of an envious Satan (different sin, see below) who hated humans and how God loved them, Adam and Eve attempted to elevate themselves to the status of gods and brought pride and every other human sin into the world.

Antidote: Vanquish Pride with HUMILITY

The opposite of pride is **humility**. It is through humility that we have an accurate view of ourselves and our relationship to God.

The Archangel Michael, Satan’s great opponent in the book of Revelation, is an edifying example of humility. He was, interestingly, a relatively low-ranking angel—the archangels are the second-lowest choir of angels—yet he is now the Prince of the Heavenly Host.

His name means “Who is like God?” (the answer being, *No one is like God!*) and it is a countermand to Lucifer’s infamous declaration.

St. Michael cast out Lucifer and his fallen angels from Heaven. **Humility has that power.**

2. Envy

The grass is always greener

Let’s move on to envy, which we touched on in the last segment.

Surprisingly, envy is not the same as jealousy. Dr. Kevin Vost explains that, while jealousy regards our sadness at the prospect of losing some good of our own, “envy regards our sadness in reaction to someone else’s good” (*The Seven Deadly Sins*). **Envy is a disordered sorrow over something that someone else has and a wish to detract from it.**

As mentioned above, Lucifer hated that Adam and Eve had the happiness that he had thrown away, and wanted to take it from them and make them sharers in his misery. He also hated God and wanted to ruin his work.

For us, envy usually takes subtler forms. Perhaps someone we know receives some honor or success that we desire, and instead of fostering thoughts of happiness for them, we indulge the desire that they

will lose it or be dishonored somehow. **Worse, we could take some concrete action to take it from them or ruin it.**

Antidote: Vanquish Envy with CHARITY

The opposite virtue to envy is **fraternal charity**. The charitable rejoice in the success of others without regard to themselves, and are ever grateful to God for what they have. It certainly goes a long way to improving our general happiness when we focus on the gifts we have been given, rather than pining after things we neither have nor need.

3. Avarice

More, more, more

Avarice is a bit like envy and can certainly follow on from it.

Avarice is the desire for more than we need, particularly in regard to material goods. Avarice is a road to nowhere, because it is a driving impulse to gather stuff—but no matter how much we have, it never satisfies.

Avarice gets particularly ugly when it involves harming the well-being of others. For example, say an employer wants to make his business more profitable and he decides to cut his employees' wages to an unfair level. That's avarice pure and simple, with some uncharity and injustice to boot.

Antidote: Vanquish Avarice with GENEROSITY

The opposite of avarice is **generosity**, whereby we give freely of what we have been given without attachment or resentment. If you want to really go big with this virtue, give not only when you have much, but when you have little, as the widow does in the Gospel (Mk. 12:41), and give those things to which you are most attached, as the rich young man refused to do (Mk. 10:17).

4. Wrath

You name it, we've probably been angry with it

This one is a perennial. Unjust anger afflicts most of us to varying degrees on a regular basis, and its evil fruits **can range in severity from an irritated eyeroll to mass murder**.

Note that I said "unjust."

St. Thomas, in his discussion on wrath (II-II:158), says that **it is a passion, not a sin, and its sinfulness depends on whether the object of our anger and the mode or amount of anger are according to right reason**. If we get angry with someone or something we shouldn't, or if we indulge the anger to an immoderate degree or it impels us to wrong action, or both, we have a sin.

Let's take a look at a few different examples of anger and see if we can parse them out.

Let's say you get angry over the sin of abortion, and decide to spend your Saturdays praying outside an abortion clinic. You are perfectly charitable to all persons going in and out, and avoid abusive thoughts or words towards those who commit or perpetuate this sin. This holy decision to pray outside the clinic is the result of good anger.

Now let's say you get angry at your mom for asking you to pick up your room and speak rudely to her.

That's bad anger.

Antidote: Wrath Avarice with MEEKNESS

The opposite of wrath is the virtue of **meekness**, a virtue which has nothing at all to do with the negative image it conjures up in the popular imagination of someone who is a wimp or a pushover.

On the contrary, **meekness is strength**, for it is the virtue that helps us to control ourselves in the face of a barrage of angry or irritated feelings and restrain our impulse to react.

5. Sloth

Spiritual torpor

Sloth, or *acedia*, is an easily misunderstood sin.

While an easy definition would be *laziness*, mere physical laziness is not what we're talking about.

Physical laziness can be a symptom of sloth, but at its core, sloth is **spiritual torpor**, and it's much more dangerous than sleeping in on Saturdays or running one mile instead of two.

St. Thomas also names *acedia tristitia*, or **sadness**, because it is sadness in the face of the work of holiness, a sadness that causes us **to refuse to take the necessary steps to achieve our sanctification**.

The Scriptures make it very clear what, in fact, is the proper attitude towards our salvation:

“Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14).

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it” (1 Cor 9:24).

And Jesus Himself told His disciples many times what they should expect from the Christian life:

“He who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt. 10:38).

In all these passages we see a **theme of movement**, and energetic movement at that.

Antidote: Vanquish Sloth with DILIGENCE

So how do we keep moving, especially when consolations run dry and our motivation starts to ebb? The virtue of **diligence** is the antidote to acedia, and it helps us to form good spiritual habits and stick with them, even when we really don't want to.

One way to view this virtue is to see it as a **spiritual drill sergeant** that motivates us to keep doing the hard things, even when our enthusiasm is lacking. Ask any soldier and he will probably tell you that he does not like getting up at 4 a.m. and running three miles every morning, but he does it because it's part of his duty as a soldier. Any really honest soldier will also tell you that, at boot camp, it was often the fear of getting yelled at by the sergeant that kept him going rather than the higher motivation of love of country.

Acedia really deserves a longer discussion not only because it is often mis-defined (you can learn more from the series *Overcoming Deadly Sin*) but also because it is endemic in our world.

Yes, the modern world holds out all kinds of sinful pleasures that seem far more attractive to us at times than the tough work of sanctification. This juxtaposition is a pathway for acedia to enter in.

6. Gluttony

Just a little more won't hurt, right?

Gluttony is **immoderation in the use of food and drink**.

Our bodies are an integral part of our human selves, and one of the features of bodies is that they can sense pleasure through the senses. The pleasure of eating and drinking is a gift from God in its proper place and within proper limits.

However, if we pursue this pleasure outside these parameters, gluttony enters in. Eating is wonderful and every culture in the world has dedicated much of its tradition to creating a tasty, delightful cuisine. But if we regularly pursue this delight beyond what I need to keep my body functioning and healthy, we may have a problem. Drink can be abused in the same way, alcoholic drinks in particular.

We can commit the sin of glutton not only through excess of food or drink, but also by insisting on particularly expensive or extravagant foods, or by consuming things too hastily or greedily (II-II:148:4).

Antidote: Vanquish Gluttony with TEMPERANCE

We combat gluttony through the cardinal virtue of **temperance**, which helps us to treat food and drink with moderation.

Fasting and abstinence are fantastic, tried-and-true ways of cultivating this virtue in ourselves.

7. Lust

The vice of the modern world

“The sins which cause most souls to go to hell are the sins of the flesh.”

St. Jacinta Marto, Fatima Visionary

If any sin has an absolute death-grip on the modern world, it is the sin of lust.

Lust is the inordinate desire for sexual pleasure. The last several decades have taught us that once let loose from the boundaries of virtue, lust runs riot over ourselves and society.

As noted above with the pleasure associated with eating and drinking, sexual pleasure is a gift from God in its proper place. Our sexuality is the means God uses to bring couples together in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony and to create new souls for the Kingdom of God.

But **pursuing sexual pleasure outside the context of marriage is gravely sinful**. Isolating this pleasure from its proper context is exactly what the sexual revolution—or you might call it, the lust revolution—wanted to achieve. And look where we are.

Sins of lust include sex outside of marriage, but also any sort of immoderate intimacy (such as passionate kissing) that inflames or indulges this passion; engaging in impure thoughts or conversations; immodesty

in dress; the use of impure movies, music, or other forms of entertainment; and all the unnatural sexual behaviors that our society is trying very hard to normalize.

Antidote: Vanquish Lust with CHASTITY

The opposite virtue to lust is **chastity**, through which we exercise control over our sexual desires and use them only in the way that God intended. The interior freedom that comes with this virtue might be surprising but is very real. It is a virtue that gives us joy and purity of mind, while also saving us from shame and regret.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” said the Lord Jesus, “for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

Fasting, abstinence, and other physical penances are powerful methods for achieving the virtue of chastity.

Conclusion + Where to Find Practical Guidance

This is just an introduction to the Seven Deadly Sins. There is so much more to learn and say about them, the concrete sins that each entails, and what we can do to combat them and cultivate the opposing virtues.

When it comes to kicking these vices in our own lives, the Sacrament of Confession is of primary importance. It sets us free and provides us with the grace to combat sin in the future. **The power of this sacrament cannot be overestimated.**

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