

What are Capital Sins?

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Why are the capital sins called the capital sins?

The capital sins are the source of all sins. The word capital derives from the Latin "*caput*," meaning "head." Note that they are not called "capital" because they are prevalent around a nation's capital or capitol. Actually, St. Thomas Aquinas preferred to use the word "vice" instead of "sin" when addressing this issue. He stated, "A capital vice is that which has an exceedingly desirable end so that in his desire for it, a man goes on to the commission of many sins, all of which are said to originate in that vice as their chief source" (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 153, 4). Here St. Thomas emphasized the disposition or the habit which inclines a person to sin. Therefore, the capital sins or vices are indeed "capital" and grave because they are the source of particular actual sins, which may be mortal or venial; in turn, the repetition of actual sins, particularly mortal sins, leads to the spiritual corruption of the person, whose life is permeated by the vice.



The Penitent Magdalene
Donatello

The traditional list of capital sins, as specified by Pope St. Gregory the Great, are as follows: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth. Interestingly, St. Thomas listed "vainglory" instead of pride to highlight that pride is the source of all sin without exception. Nevertheless, we will now focus briefly on each of the capital sins; the classic definitions in moral theology are quoted from Father Dominic Prummer's *Handbook of Moral Theology*.

Pride is "an inordinate desire for one's own excellence." Pride is said to be "complete" when a person is so filled with it that he refuses to subject his intellect and will to God, and to obey His commandments. Such a person has contempt for God and those who represent Him. In a sense, a person with complete pride makes himself a god.

However, pride may also be incomplete: Here a person does not reject God or his superiors; rather, he simply thinks of himself too highly.

Associated with pride is "vainglory," whereby a person has an inordinate desire to manifest his own excellence and to receive praise. Of course, every person should be proud of accomplishments and be thankful to God for the ability to perform well. However, such a disposition differs from the person on "the ego trip" who is motivated to do something simply for future praise and recognition, or always has to talk about "I did this" and "I did that" so as to impress people and receive their praise.

Pride is a very dangerous vice, as St. Thomas noted, because a person is so susceptible to it due to the

woundedness of original sin. It can easily creep into our lives, grow quickly without recognition, and take hold, infecting all that we do. St. John Vianney taught, "Pride makes us hate our equals because they are our equals; our inferiors from the fear that they may equal us; our superiors because they are above us." Spiritual remedies for pride include regular and thorough self-examination, the practice of humility and meditation on Christ's humility and service.

Avarice "is the inordinate love of having possessions or riches." A person, motivated by greed, is preoccupied with having and having more. A greedy person attaches such value to wealth and possessions that the accumulation and retention of them become the major goal of life and take priority over everyone and everything else. Greed comes in different forms: For instance, some are greedy with material things, always wanting more and only giving the surplus, the "little tip," the something that will not be missed. Some are greedy with time, only doing what will benefit them in some way. Some are greedy in their relationships, collecting people for status or using people for advantage. A person easily becomes hard-hearted and blind to the needs of those less fortunate. Sparked by greed, a person can take on a sense of self-sufficiency, complacency and independence of God.

To combat greed, one must be thankful in prayer each day for the many blessings enjoyed, examine how well those blessings are used within one's means to help those less fortunate and remember that when one dies, all is left behind. A person needs to meditate on the many teachings and examples in Sacred Scripture which warn against greed. Our Lord said, "Avoid greed in all its forms" (Lk 12:15) and noted, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mk 10:24). A person should meditate on the example of Jesus in particular: St. John Vianney taught, "Avarice is an inordinate love of riches and the good things of this life. Jesus Christ, to cure us of it, was born in extreme poverty, deprived of all comforts. He chose a Mother who was poor. He willed to pass as the Son of a humble workman." Yes, when we die and face judgment, we stand before our Lord with empty hands; what is important at that time is a soul filled with love for Him and inscribed with good deeds.

Lust is "the inordinate desire for sexual pleasure." Filled with lust, a person selfishly seeks to satisfy his sexual desire. He seeks personal, fleeting gratification. He looks upon others as merely bodies rather than as persons. Sins stemming from lust include dwelling on impure thoughts, masturbation, fornication, adultery and viewing pornography. St. Bernard of Clairvaux taught, "Inordinate love of the flesh is cruelty, because under the appearance of pleasing the body we kill the soul." In the end, lust leads to an idolization of sexual pleasure.

Lust is different from that healthy desire of a husband and wife to share their love as husband and wife in marriage. Conjugal love in marriage is a free, self-giving action which respects the dignity of both husband and wife, affirms their marital vows and is open to life.

Therefore, to combat lust, a person should pray for the virtue of chastity, guard against the occasions of sin (which are many in this world) and have a clear vision of the goodness of a person's own sexuality, marriage and marital love as God has intended. When one has lustful thoughts or desires, and may have fallen to sin, the spiritual directors also recommend frequent confession, the avoidance of idleness and distracting oneself. For instance, once St. Francis of Assisi was so filled with lustful thoughts he threw

himself into a rose bush. (Perhaps we should plant more rose bushes around the Washington area. Perhaps Dolley Madison had great foresight in planting a rose garden at the White House.)

Envy is "sadness on account of the goods possessed by another which are regarded as harmful to oneself since they diminish one's own excellence or renown." Envy breeds hatred, gossip, detraction and resentment against one's neighbor. Not only does an envious person resent another person's goods be they talents, looks, possessions, works or popularity he also takes joy in and even relishes in the setbacks or adversity that a person faces. Envy is a vicious sin because it creeps into the best of relationships, even between spouses who love each other. Some of the greatest saints, like St. Bernadette, suffered because of the envy of other religious in their own communities. Remedies for envy include the practice of humility, being grateful for one's own goods and thinking of the consequences of envy, whether loss of friendship or divine punishment.

Gluttony is "an inordinate desire for food and drink." Gluttony is injurious to one's mental and physical health, and oftentimes masks an even deeper spiritual problem. One must practice the virtue of temperance to prevent gluttony. Also, a person should be mindful of the physical consequences to abusing food and drink; for instance, excessive drinking can lead to alcoholism. Finally, a person should always be mindful of those who are less fortunate and who suffer from lack of proper drinking water and food. There is no good reason to waste food especially, and those who do so are also guilty of gluttony taking something, not eating it and throwing it away in the trash.

Anger is "the inordinate desire for revenge." (Keep in mind that this "wrongful anger" is different from "righteous anger," where a person is angry about injustice in the world or even personal situations, and seeks to address the issue and restore justice.) Anger offends first of all against charity since a person is prone to act in a way and say things which can hurt another person. For example, words spoken in anger, whether unkind words or hurtful statements about another, can cut to the very core of a person. Second, anger sometimes offends against justice since a person goes beyond the course to remedy an issue and seeks revenge. St. Thomas Aquinas listed six effects of the vice of anger: indignation, mental disturbance, noisy speech, blasphemy, abuse and quarrels. To guard against anger, a person must be true to the virtue of justice in thought, word and deed; be in control of himself in addressing an issue; and look to the example of Christ. St. Catherine of Siena said, "There is no sin nor wrong that gives a man such a foretaste of Hell in this life as anger and impatience."

Sloth is "sorrow in the face of spiritual good inasmuch as it is God's good" (St. Thomas Aquinas). Sloth is not just laziness, but especially spiritual laziness. Sins which stem from the vice of sloth include lukewarmness toward divine precepts, drifting to what is forbidden and frequenting the occasion of sin, faintheartedness and despair of salvation. The remedy for sloth is remembering one's promised eternal reward as well as one's punishment for sin. Archbishop Fulton Sheen taught, "Sloth is a malady of the will which causes us to neglect our duties. Sloth may be either physical or spiritual. It is physical when it manifests itself in laziness, procrastination, idleness, indifference and nonchalance. It is spiritual when it shows itself in an indifference to character betterment, a distaste for the spiritual, a hurried crowding of devotions, a lukewarmness and failure to cultivate new virtue" (*Victory over Vice*, p. 73).

The seven capital sins, or vices, are realities. Each Christian must realize how susceptible he is to these vices due to the effects of original sin. Nevertheless, with God's grace, given especially through the Sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Penance, adherence to the commandments, and the practice of virtue, the Christian will stay on the path of holiness. As Jesus said, "You must be made perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

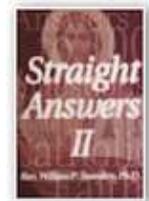
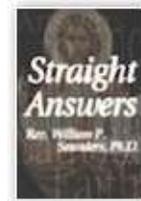
Acknowledgement

Saunders, Rev. William. "What are Capital Sins?" *Arlington Catholic Herald*.

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