

THE ROSARY

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Voice of the Rosary Confraternity

LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER DISMAS SAYRE, O.P., DIRECTOR

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As our readers undoubtedly know, the Extraordinary Year of Mercy comes to an end this December, on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin. As he draws to a close his letter to introduce the Year of Mercy, our Holy Father turns to Mary, and prays that

...the sweetness of her countenance watch over us... so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the Incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh...because she participated intimately in the mystery of His love.

The season of Advent, which begins this year on November 27th, is truly the time for Catholics to celebrate – and for an extended period – the comforting presence of Mary in our lives. These days are a time to consider how – like Mary – we may take God's word into our hearts and there allow it to assume flesh and blood, so that we, too, may touch the world with our merciful God's human face, human hands, and human voice.

When we gather to celebrate the Mass, our prayer opens a window onto eternity that destroys the two thousand years and the thousands of miles that separate us from Calvary, and allows us to stand with Mary, listening to Jesus' words of forgiveness. Mary's Rosary enables us to keep the mystery of the Eucharist alive in our hearts. The prayers of the Rosary unite us with Mary, as she participates – like no one else – in nearly every one of the saving events in the life of Jesus and the early Church. We must not be surprised, then, that our Holy Father urges us:

Let us address her in the words of the Salve Regina, a prayer ever ancient and ever new, so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son Jesus.

LOOKING AHEAD

With the arrival of Advent we look forward to Christmas, when we celebrate God's great gift to us in the Incarnation of His Son. Our Christmas presents should remind us of this immense blessing, so if you are seeking appropriate Christmas gifts, let us suggest the following.

A perennial favorite among the Rosary Center's friends is the children's book, CHRISTMAS MOUSE.



THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The story relates the adventures of a little mouse who is being chased by a cat. He finds himself inside a home, gazing at a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. He then comes upon a book and falls into it. To his surprise, he is in a stable, and Jesus has just been born.

LITTLE STAR, by Anthony DeStefano and illustrated by Mark Elliot, is certain to become a Christmas classic. This delightful tale connects the star atop the Christmas tree to the true meaning of Christmas – the birth of Jesus.

MOTHER MARY COLORING BOOK is a Catholic contribution to the new wave of coloring books for grown-ups. Here's a pleasant – and prayerful – tool to help one escape the demands of a world of busy-ness and noise, and spend some quiet moments alone with the Mother of Our Savior.

CHAMPIONS OF THE ROSARY has been published, at last. Fr. Donald Calloway's book explores the history of the Rosary and its "champions" who have promoted it over the centuries. Fr. Reginald Martin observed, "Champions of the Rosary is remarkably accessible, and the content in these pages will help all of us become champions of the rosary."

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Capital Sins: V

Avarice

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

AVARICE: SPIRITUAL SIN OR PHYSICAL?

When we consider the sins that are the sad outcome of our fallen humanity, we can distinguish among them in a number of ways. The Church Fathers, John Cassian and Gregory the Great, saw the Capital Sins as either spiritual or physical. Among the former are those we have considered in our reflections thus far: pride, envy, and anger. To these we must now add Avarice, which we also name Greed, or Covetousness.

To name Greed a “spiritual” sin might seem odd, but St. Thomas Aquinas remarks,

Sins are seated chiefly in the affections: and all the affections or passions of the soul have their term in pleasure and sorrow... Now some pleasures are carnal and some spiritual. Carnal pleasures are those which are consummated in the carnal senses – for instance, the pleasures of the table and sexual pleasures: while spiritual pleasures are those which are consummated in the mere apprehension of the soul... such is covetousness for the covetous man takes pleasure in the consideration of himself as a possessor of riches. (ST, II-II, 118. 7)

THE NEED FOR REASON

In earlier reflections, when we pondered the ninth and tenth commandments, we encountered “concupiscence,” which our *Catechism* defines as “...any intense form of human desire,” (CCC, No. 2515) Our theology employs this term to describe the action of our sensitive appetite against our reason when we are faced with certain moral choices. Concupiscence is what St. Paul has in mind when he employs the image of the flesh rebelling against the spirit. We noted the Ninth Commandment does not urge us to embrace an utter austerity of life. St. Thomas Aquinas observes, “...none can live without some sensible and bodily pleasure.” (ST I-II, 34.1) What characterizes appropriate pleasures is their being governed by reason.

A PLACE WITH THE COMMANDMENTS

Our *Catechism* teaches the Tenth Commandment “unfolds and completes the ninth.” (CCC, No. 2534) The Ninth forbids unreasonable desires of the flesh; the Tenth forbids unreasonable desires for possessions, and governs the means by which we acquire them. Like the other commandments of the “Second Tablet” of the Decalogue, all of which govern our dealings with one another, the Tenth Commandment is rooted in justice and, as we have seen, reason. St. Thomas Aquinas remarks,

...man’s good consists in a certain measure... [and] man seeks, according to a certain measure, to have external riches, in so far as they are necessary for him to live in keeping with his condition of life. (ST, II-II, 118. 1)

St. Thomas teaches the vice of Avarice enters when we turn our back on the moderation that ought to characterize our relation with created goods. He writes:

...it will be a sin for [one] to exceed this measure by wishing to acquire or keep [created goods] immoderately. This is what is meant by covetousness, which is defined as immoderate love of possessing. (Ibid.)

THE NECESSITY OF MODERATION

Here we might profitably reflect that our Scripture is often misquoted. We frequently hear, “Money is the root of all evil.” In fact, what St. Paul reminds his disciple, Timothy, is “The love of money is the root of all evils...” (1 Tim 6.10) Here, again, we encounter the important notion of moderation, which determines the morality of our attitude toward possessions. We live in a commercial society, so we have no choice but to embrace the rules and employ the means that govern it. Our actions become sinful when we allow the rules to govern us.

WHY A “CAPITAL” SIN?

When he considers what characterizes a “Capital” sin, St. Thomas finds his answer in the other sinful actions a sin promotes or encourages. Avarice is a Capital sin, he argues, because “riches give the great promise of self-sufficiency.” The Preacher, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, very cynically observes, “...money answers everything.” (Ec 10.19) Avarice encourages us to forget our dependence on God, and to cultivate a disdain for our fellow human beings. After all, if we possess wealth sufficient to buy whatever we need, what need have we of other individuals?

But disdain for God and a casual disregard for our fellow creatures are not the only sins that result from Avarice. St. Thomas observes that because it is an excessive delights in retaining what we have, “covetousness gives rise to insensibility to mercy, because... a man’s heart is not softened by mercy to assist the needy with his riches.” (ST. II-II, 118.8) These words take on a special poignancy as this Extraordinary Year of Mercy draws to its close, and they challenge us to ask whether our desire to “own” may have blinded us to the plight of those in need.

THE CHALLENGE OF MERCY

Our theology teaches that Mercy is sorrow for another’s distress, coupled with a practical action to relieve it. Mercy demands looking beyond ourselves, to consider the situation of the many unfortunate souls with whom we share our planet. To do so unites us with Jesus, who, in *Misericordiae Vultus* (“The Face of Mercy”), his letter to introduce this Year of Mercy, our Holy Father reminds us,

...is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously. The relationships he forms with the people who approach him manifest something entirely unique and unrepeatable. The signs he works, especially in favor of sinners, the poor the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing is devoid of compassion. (MV, 8)

The Holy Father continues, “The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person.” (MV, 11) These words reflect the Church’s tradition that gifts are never given simply to enrich the individual who receives them; they are given, in trust, for the benefit of the entire community.

“MONEY ANSWERS EVERYTHING”

Avarice is a denial of this truth, and the more it is embraced, the greater a threat it poses to an individual’s spiritual life. In our Capitalist society, we are surrounded with “markets” – real or symbolic. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes observed “money answers everything,” and we cannot deny the usefulness of even modest wealth, which permits an individual to accomplish a great deal of good.

But the efficiency of the world’s markets – like the moral rectitude of those who use them – must be built upon a foundation of Justice, and St. Thomas pointed out several moral dangers posed by Avarice. Should money not answer in an individual’s quest for a possession, Avarice might suggest the use of force or violence to secure the desired good. But even if it does not lead individuals to inflict physical harm to achieve their ends, Avarice can undermine the relations that ought to govern our human relations. Lying perverts the value of human speech, and perjury – lying under oath – increases the gravity of the sin.

THE EFFECTS OF AVARICE

When Avarice leads one to embrace falsehood in the desire to gain (or protect) material goods, St. Thomas says we encounter the sin of fraud. When desire for gain leads one to betray another person, we have succumbed to treachery – the moral consequence of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus. (ST, II-II, 118.8)

These considerations recall Pope Francis’ words begging a change of heart among

...men and women belonging to criminal organizations of any kind... Do not fall into the terrible trap of thinking that life depends on money and that, in comparison with money, anything else is devoid of value or dignity. This is nothing but an illusion! We cannot take money with us into the life beyond. Money does not bring us happiness. Violence inflicted for the sake of amassing riches soaked in blood makes one neither powerful nor immortal. (MV, 19)

THE REMEDY OF LIBERALITY

The remedy for Avarice is Liberality, which St. Thomas defines as putting to good use “...the things of this world that are granted us for our livelihood.” (ST, II-II 117.1) The essential words in this definition are “good use.” St. Augustine wrote, “It belongs to virtue to use well the things that we can use ill,”

and Liberality is a good use of God’s bounty. This means not only putting our resources to good use, but putting them to good use for the right reason. For example, we are not being liberal by making a large contribution to a hospital if all we seek is recognition for our gift.

At the same time, Liberality has nothing to do with the amount of a gift. The virtue is altogether concerned with the individual’s ability to make the gift. Thus, a poor person may be quite liberal, as St. Augustine observed, “Liberality is proportionate to a man’s substance, *i.e.*, his means, for it consists not in the quantity given, but in the habit of the giver.” As an illustration, we might consider Jesus’ response to the widow’s contribution to the Temple, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all... for they contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty, put in all the living that she had.” (Lk 21.3)

LIBERALITY AND JUSTICE

The virtue of Justice moves us to give to another person what he or she has a right to. Liberality, by contrast, moves us to give what we have a right to. St. Thomas, and others, see a connection between Liberality and Justice for two reasons. First, because (like Justice) Liberality is directed toward another person. Secondly, both Liberality and Justice are concerned with external things. And here we can see a link with Mercy, which challenges us to imitate Our Savior who, in the words of our Holy Father, “went out to everyone without exception.” (MV, 12)

LIBERALITY AND THE CROSS

In an earlier reflection we mentioned a contemporary moralist, Kevin Vost. In his book, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Vost quotes Fulton Sheen, who perceived a remedy for Avarice in the last of Jesus’ last words on Good Friday, “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.” Sheen wrote,

1. The more ties we have to the earth, the harder it will be for us to die.
2. We were never meant to be perfectly satisfied here below. (Vost, p. 133)

Jesus took on our flesh to go through every moment of our human existence. Not so we would not have to, but to show us how. Thus, his life illustrates the lessons we should embrace from our consideration of Avarice and Liberality. Vost sums up these lessons when he observes,

All that any of us will have to take back to God on our...last day will be the things of the spirit... our very souls. ...There will be no more dollars to earn, no more goods to accumulate, and we will be judged by the weight not of our wealth, but of our charity. (Ibid.)

INSPIRATION IN MARY’S WORDS

Our Blessed Mother gives voice to our vocation to Liberality when, in her Magnificat, she praises God, who “has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.” Mary’s hymn describes God’s universal care for humanity, and His disregard for profit gained by Avarice. In our lives we cannot imitate the global scope of God’s merciful outreach, but Mary invites us to praise it with her, and to embrace its example in our dealings with one another – and perhaps especially in our concern for the poor. ■

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