

The Most Unenjoyable Sin
Matthew 7:1-5; I Corinthians 13:4-8a

If you know your sins, it is not hard to decide which is the most unenjoyable. It is Envy. Envy is not a crime, of course, for it is almost endemic (characteristic of) among clerics, attorneys, professors and housewives, who, ordinarily, are not criminal types. So Envy is not illegal, unconstitutional, or even un-American. Furthermore, Envy is not wicked enough to be a “mortal” sin. Over-indulgence in it does not bring automatic citizenship in hell, just a **visa**. It opens the door. (You know where you can go if you keep at it.)

So, Envy is just one “capital” sin – which is medieval, Gregorian parlance (language), meaning: “bad enough to raise all kinds of mischief in a monastery.” It is, to this day, a capital sin of people who live very close together, whether in a monkish cloister or a modern city, germinating, in the close, fetid atmosphere of competition, a veritable swarm of little anti-God acts and anti-good deeds. St. Thomas Aquinas called it a “capital” sin, because it is highly productive of other sins: a very good breeder of very bad things.

And I have called it the most unenjoyable of all such capital sins, because, right from the start, envy is no fun. Never a kick, not one thrill in it. But you don’t have to be a monk to know it is shameful and must be carefully hidden. It is the sin that still cannot speak its name. Unlike the other capital sins for which one can always find some justification, unlike the sin the monks called Superbia or “Pride”, which can at least masquerade as aristocracy and claim to be “of the manor born” – unlike the one they called Gula or “Gluttony”, which can pose as driving “ambition” – or “a healthy appetite” – unlike the one they named Acedia “Sloth”, which can call itself “being worldly wise” or @ in modern parlance “the weary sophisticate”, -- unlike the one they called in Latin **Luxuria** “Lust”, which can masquerade as “macho-man or @ Playboy whatever” – or unlike the medieval Ira or “Wrath”, which can always adopt a pharisaic pose or “righteous indignation”, -- the capital sin of which we are speaking is everywhere branded inexcusable; for even the most hardened sinners, who admit to everything else, consider this one a shame, and if they feel a twist of it under their ribs, fall silent, for, as the Proverbist wrote: “wrath is cruel, anger flares, but who can stand Envidia –envy?” (27:4) Ah – there’s the culprit! Envy! Who can stand it? Nobody! (Not even J.R.!) Even in a monastery – Especially in a monastery crowded under one roof like that. Envy is an affliction of the out-cast nobody can

tolerate. Envy is a jaundice of the soul, never a thrill to it. From the very start (says Pr. 14:30) it “makes the bones to crack.” The root word for “Envy” is not green as we say – but “red”, hence “inflamed”, “infected”, “diseased.” Envy is a loathsome disease no one wishes to admit to. The monastic orders thought of it as a disease – in their books of spiritual discipline they talked about its detection, its cause, its outcome, and its cure.

1) Its detection is fairly easy: for example it’s the sick feeling you get –say in the 3rd grade when the tests, academic and athletic, begin, the inevitable and unending process of separating you from your superior friends. Envy. It’s the sinking spell you have at 13, when someone else, especially some buddy, or your brother or sister, makes the team, gets elected, chosen, etc., and all you get is left out. Envy. Later, say at 30, it’s the pain of having to be, again and again, “the good loser,” having to congratulate whoever takes the prize away from you, of having to “grin and bear it” when the promotion goes to the other fellow, while you are expected (nay, required) to rejoice at their success and happiness; not that you don’t wish them well – to a certain extent, of course – but, after all, aren’t you equally as deserving as they? And why do some people get all the breaks? Now then, you may try to hide this affliction from others – after all it’s not a socially acceptable disease – but you give yourself away, when forgetting the insight of Jesus, “Judge not, that ye be not judged”, you draw attention to envy in other men and women. To put Jesus’ saying in another way: “It takes one to know one.” Therefore, to say, “Look at him, he’s sick with envy” is a sure give away. You also admit, albeit unwittingly, to envy, when you try to elicit it in others. To commiserate in someone’s ear, “you, my friend, are much cleverer and more deserving than he is; you, old buddy, should have gotten the promotion; you know, and you have every right to be insulted,” etc., is to reveal one person sick with envy, trying to infect another. If you are not envious already, there is no lack of those who will try to give it to you. “Those who have ears,” said Jesus, “let them hear.”

So the detection of the disease the monks called Envidia is all too easy. For, whenever, instead of the healthy reaction St. Paul describes, “weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice,” you begin instead to rejoice at a competitor’s weeping, and to weep at a competitor’s rejoicing, then, look out, for you have a touch of the old virus, the medieval monkish sin called Envidia. What mischief it can indeed create in the monastery or wherever people live close together.

3) And what about cause? The monks hit it right on the head. It's the ancient fear. Fear that your accomplishments will go unrecognized, (so Cain envied Abel); fear that your own potentialities are being neglected, (thus Esau envied Jacob); fear that your place will be taken over by the younger, brighter stranger (so did Saul envy David); or fear that you are unloved, (so those brothers envied Joseph); fear that you are unappreciated in the family, (so the pious elder brother envied the returning prodigal); and so on and on and on, ad infinitum and ad nauseum. You see, Envy is felt not so much of the high and mighty who are far away, but of competitors close at hand, be they parent, child, husband, wife, sister, brother, friend, colleague – anyone whose success seems to reflect adversely on your won standing, or who seems to hog the limelight, or gets all the breaks, or who in some way casts a frightful shadow on your self-image, diminishes your sense of importance. Envy arises out of the fear of those with whom you are in competition, real or imagined. 3) And the prognosis? The outcome? Not good said the old monks and still true. Envy is inevitably the death of love and friendship – of happiness. It spoils the joy of every accomplishment, for the only thing you see is the joy of those who seem to have accomplished so much more. So envy ends in paralysis of creative effort. You are so depressed by what everyone else is doing to make their lives useful and happy, that you are not able to live constructively yourself. What energy you have left is used in the hopeless task of trying to discredit those who are making something of their lives. When you are envious, you feel so sorry for yourself, you soon have a self everyone feels sorry for. And to be pitied is absolute death to the envier. So the outcome is not good.

4) But isn't there some cure? Some therapy? Something one can do to cure the disease? Or is it terminal? Does one just lie around and die of envy?

Many do. For often what therapy we try is woefully inadequate, even harmful, aggravates the condition.

For example, some enviers, on their bad days, when they feel especially low on the totem pole, try sulking, or snapping at people, or slinking off to bite on themselves. That doesn't help. Some try hysterics; fit flinging is a juvenile remedy. That doesn't work either. Others claim the doubtful fame of the constant loser and admit, with a terrifying laugh, they are helpless and hopeless. "I'm hopeless – Ha! Ha!" But that's hollow. Others dream of inheriting a windfall, or of marrying a million, or of some other such miracle. New Yorker cartoon – pathetic little figure of a man: "I was not born greatness – nor acquired greatness – but I am still hoping to have it

thrust upon me.” And that’s close to madness neurosis. And some just go around telling all and sundry, “I may be a nobody, but at least I have a clear conscience and really am happy, really I am, really!” Really? But none of this comes off very well. Poor therapy. It does nothing to relieve the red distress.

Actually, the only cure for envy is, as the old monks saw, a **heroic** one. It has a technical name. It’s called “conversion” – and that’s radical treatment.

Paul and James join hands in agreeing that envy is antithetical (in absolute contrast to) to the faith, and only a good dose of honest Christianity can cure it. There’s no place for envy at the foot of the cross. There’s enough sin and failure and pain in this life for everyone, so that no one should complain of his share, and enough labor and laughter and love to go around also – if you only look for it. So let God do the judging. What a relief to let him do it. How free you are then to get on with the business of living life to the full, never mind whether you are behind this one, or ahead of that one, never mind whether you are thought a success or failure, that’s in God’s keeping. In the meantime, you will quietly live the life of Christ’s love – a most practical theology – for love is not envious, said Paul. It is kind. Is not puffed up. Doth not behave itself unseemly. Rejoiceth not in iniquity. Rejoiceth in the truth. Envy is the death of the soul, but love abideth.

Let us pray:

O Lord, deliver us from the foolish fear of being insignificant, that we envy no one. Only let us live life the best we can, under the light of Christ, and do find our joy and our peace, leaving the outcome with thee. Amen

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