

## 25<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (September 19, 2021)

All three readings today speak to the sin of envy and jealousy. St. James says in the second reading: “when jealousy...exist[s], there is disorder and every foul practice.” This attitude shows up in the first reading from Wisdom where the wicked hate the just one simply because he is just; they want to kill him because his goodness is ‘obnoxious’ to them. And Jesus in the gospel tells the disciples that he would be killed by others who, among other reasons for their hatred, were jealous of him.

Envy has traditionally been considered as one of the seven deadly sins—those attitudes that lead to other sins and vices. The Catechism describes envy as “resentment or sadness at another’s good fortune, and the desire to have it for oneself.” Maybe your neighbor has a nicer house or car than you have; you resent that and you let it affect your attitude toward that neighbor. Or one of your classmates is more popular than you are; you get angry about that and so you say mean things about them and try to put them down. Or someone else’s health, physical appearance, marriage or family life seems much better than yours, and so you complain to God because it seems so unfair. Envy can even become mortal sin if our resentment of the blessings enjoyed by others leads us to wish them serious harm.

Scripture itself is filled with examples of the destructive power of envy. Remember Cain and Abel? Cain greatly resented the fact that God preferred Abel’s sacrifice to his own...and so he killed his brother in a fit of jealous rage. Still in the book of Genesis, we read that Jacob had twelve sons and that he had a special love for his son Joseph—a fact that his brothers resented very much. They were going to kill him out of envy, but ended up selling him into slavery. Centuries later, King Saul became very jealous of the future king David whose victories were praised more highly than his own, and so he sought David’s death. And Jesus himself was the victim of envy as already mentioned. In fact, Matthew’s gospel tells us explicitly that even Pontius Pilate knew full well that Jesus was handed over to him by his enemies out of jealousy.

Envy and jealousy have indeed left a long trail of sadness and destruction throughout history, even in salvation history...and we today are no less tempted to that sin than were those in the past. But why? Why is the temptation to envy so strong? If we think about it for a moment, we will see not only how wrong envy is, but also how pathetic and even—pardon my bluntness here—how dumb it is. Many have noted, for example, that envy doesn’t do anything good for us whatsoever. Peter Kreeft (one of my favorite authors) says it is the only one of the seven deadly sins “that gives the sinner no pleasure at all, not even fake and temporary satisfaction.”

And that is so true! Think about it: indulging in food or drink to the point of gluttony or drunkenness may indeed feel very enjoyable at the time...even if it will likely lead to feeling miserable later on. Giving in to temptations of lust may indeed lead to an immediate physical pleasure...even if it can and often does harm our relationships with others and even the sense of one’s own dignity. But what good does envy do; does it make us feel good or happy or joyful or pleasurable...even if only for a moment? No—not at all, not for a single moment. Envy and jealousy leads only to bitterness, resentment and anger: “it’s not fair that that person has more than me!” And the more we dwell on that supposed unfairness, the more we choose to dwell on that supposed unfairness, no matter what the details, we sink into even deeper bitterness,

resentment and anger. Who on earth would really want to live in such a miserable state of self-imposed imprisonment??

Perhaps the worst thing of all about envy: it is a sin of ingratitude; it's a slap in the face of God. St. John Vianney said that envy is a 'crime against God'. At its root, envy says: "God, what you gave me isn't good enough. And on top of that, it's not fair that that person has more of what I want than I have." Envy refuses to recognize the incredible goodness and generosity that God has already shown and continues daily to show us in so many ways. Envy and ingratitude really do go hand in hand.

The good news is that we do not have to let the temptations to envy or jealousy conquer us; we are not helpless in the face of such temptations. The help and grace of God are always available to help us win that battle. Desire that grace, pray for that grace, and God will respond. The sacrament of confession and reconciliation is a particularly powerful weapon in our battle against envy. So is the prayer of gratitude and nurturing what many call an 'attitude of gratitude'. The more we remember and thank God for all we already are and all that we already have, the less we will worry or fret about what others have that we don't have.

The thankful person doesn't want to waste the time or energy of being mad at the supposed 'unfairness' of life. And even more: the thankful person can even learn to be glad for the good fortune of others. I came across this prayer of someone who struggled with envy: "today I have been seeking grace to rejoice...[in]...others, even where it casts me into the shade...Lord, give more and more to those whom I have despised." That kind of prayer is true wisdom and is also a genuine sign of the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in action. That same grace will help us to resist the temptation to envy and to pray in the same way...if we really want to do so.