

"The envious man is always sad"

In his 28 February general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on vices and virtues, speaking about envy and vainglory.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we examine two deadly vices that we find in the great lists that the spiritual tradition has left us: envy and vainglory.

Let us start with envy. If we read Holy Scripture (cf. *Gen 4*), it appears to us as one of the oldest vices: Cain's hatred of Abel is unleashed when he realizes that his brother's sacrifices are pleasing to God. Cain was the firstborn of Adam and Eve, he had taken the largest share of his father's inheritance; yet, it is enough for Abel, the younger brother, to succeed in a small feat, for Cain to become enraged. The face of the envious man is always sad: he's always looking down, he seems to be continually investigating the ground; but in reality, he sees nothing, because his mind is wrapped up in thoughts full of wickedness. Envy, if unchecked, leads to hatred of the other. Abel would be killed at the hands of Cain, who could not bear his brother's happiness.

Envy is an evil that has not only been investigated in the Christian sphere: it has attracted the attention of

philosophers and wise men of every culture. At its basis is a relationship of hate and love: one desires the evil for the other, but secretly desires to be like him. The other is the epiphany of what we would like to be, and what we actually are not. His good fortune seems to us an injustice: surely, we think to ourselves, we deserve his successes or good fortune much more!

At the root of this vice is a false idea of God: we do not accept that God has His own “math,” different from ours. For example, in Jesus' parable about the workers called by the master to go into the vineyard at different times of the day, those in the first hour believe they are entitled to a higher wage than those who arrived last; but the master gives everyone the same pay, and says, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Mt 20:15).

We would like to impose our own selfish logic on God; instead, the logic of God is love. The good things He gives us are meant to be shared. This is why St. Paul exhorts Christians, “Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (*Rom 12:10*). Here is the remedy for envy!

And now we come to the second vice we examine today: vainglory. It goes hand in hand with the demon of envy, and together these two vices are characteristic of a person who aspires to be the centre of the world, free to exploit everything and everyone, the object of all praise and love. Vainglory is an inflated and baseless self-esteem. The vainglorious person possesses an unwieldy “I”: he has no empathy and takes no notice of the fact that there are other people in the world besides him. His relationships are always instrumental, marked by the

dominating the other. His person, his accomplishments, his achievements must be shown to everyone: he is a perpetual beggar for attention. And if at times his qualities are not recognized, he becomes fiercely angry. Others are unfair, they do not understand, they are not up to it. In his writings, *Evagrius Ponticus* describes the bitter affair of a certain monk struck by vainglory. It happened that, after his first successes in the spiritual life, he already felt that he had arrived, so he rushed into the world to receive its praise. But he did not realize that he was only at the beginning of the spiritual path, and that a temptation was lurking that would soon bring him down.

To heal the vainglorious, spiritual teachers do not suggest many remedies. For in the end, the evil of vanity has its remedy in itself: the praise the vainglorious man hopes to

reap from the world will soon turn against him. And how many people, deluded by a false self-image, have then fallen into sins of which they would soon be ashamed!

The finest instruction for overcoming vainglory can be found in the testimony of St. Paul. The Apostle always reckoned with a defect that he could never overcome. Three times he asked the Lord to deliver him from that torment, but finally Jesus answered him, “My grace is sufficient for you; for strength is fully manifested in weakness.” From that day Paul was set free. And his conclusion should also become ours: “I will therefore gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (*2 Cor 12:9*).

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