

GREEN WITH ENVY: THE GNAWING WORM OF THE SOUL

Earlier this fall, we read this passage during the Mass for the 25th Sunday of Ordinary Time: “The wicked say: Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us. . . . Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him.” (Wisdom 2:12,17) I suspect many could appreciate how someone, who having seen a former school mate driving a sporty new BMW M3, might be seething inside with jealousy— “I was smarter than him in high school!” People devise myriad reasons to allow jealousy to gnaw at them, typically concluding that somehow they received the raw end of the deal. The success of others all too often has as a corollary our own estimation that we were on the receiving end of some grave injustice. This is extremely dangerous to the soul.

St. Cyprian of Carthage, the first great Latin theologian, wrote a 3rd century treatise on envy. It is brief, and well worth the read. “But what a gnawing worm of the soul is it, what a plague-spot of our thoughts, what a **rust of the heart**, to be jealous of another, either in respect of his virtue or of his happiness. . . .” (Treatise X.7, emphasis added) He takes a different tack, one I had not previously considered. Speaking of other ills, he notes that they have an end time: “In the adulterer the offense ceases when the violation is perpetrated; in the case of the murderer, the crime is at rest when the homicide is committed; and the possession of the booty puts an end to the rapacity of the thief; and the completed deception places a limit to the wrong of the cheat.” Ah, but jealousy? Now that is a different story. Cyprian calls it “an evil continually enduring, and a sin without end. In proportion as he who is envied has the advantage of a greater success, in that proportion the envious man burns with the fires of jealousy to an increased heat.” (Treatise X, 256 A.D.)

Even here, could we not say that it is one thing to be jealous of another’s material possessions, but to be **envious** of their **spiritual goodness**? Where does that come from? It seems to me that it can only come from one place, namely an uncomfortableness with one’s own moral life. The just one is “obnoxious” to us precisely because that person makes us see ourselves in a bad light, but perhaps a true light. And that’s the rub. It is not their arrogance or spiritual pride we are discussing, but merely their own goodness. It bothers some because they cannot live the same life, and deep down they know it. So, if I am incapable of living a virtuous life, the fact that another appears to be able to do so is quite bothersome to me.

What is the remedy? Again, Cyprian offers 1800-year-old advice that is as pertinent today as ever: “Be cured by that whereby you had been wounded. Love those whom you previously had hated; favor those whom you envied with unjust disparagements. Imitate good men, if you are able to follow them; but if you are not able to follow them, at least rejoice with them, and congratulate those who are better than you.” (Treatise X.17) I take this to mean that we ought to look to the very people whom we “abhor” (my, that is a strong word!) and truly be happy for them. Could we actually pray for them? Do not pray for yourselves, but **pray for them!** If you cannot be happy for another’s spiritual welfare, why is that? Why does their goodness bother you? Do you think they are hypocritical? What is your evidence? Are they haughty about their goodness? How is it manifest? If you lack evidence, then you have convicted yourself. Envy is consumed with the idea that the goodness of another somehow threatens you. How could it?

For years I have personally (and silently) questioned the need for the office of Monsignor in the Church. As an honorary title, it surely had its place, as priests were rewarded for exemplary service. Still, I became aware of too many dioceses in which there was clerical disappointment and envy when one priest was chosen over another. “Get over it,” one might say, but given weak human nature, it fostered an **unhealthy competition** that too often served the Church poorly. This Archdiocese has not seen a new monsignor since the late 1960’s—the office has virtually vanished with the death of its last investees. So, when Pope Francis limited its bestowal to priests who have reached the age of sixty-five, I for one was not disappointed. It’s a moot point here, but the honorific never caught on in my own psyche. No offense to monsignors, but I saw more drawbacks than benefits.

Spiritual envy gnaws away at our soul and we must assiduously try to recognize it in ourselves and resist it— resist it vigorously. It robs us of happiness, but more importantly, it makes a mockery out of our duty to

promote the good of another. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Parson's Tale* (really a sermon), the Parson categorizes envy as the worst of sins, "for in truth, all other sins are at times directed against one special virtue alone. But envy takes sorrow in all the blessings of his neighbor." (Parson's Tale, 488-89). Let us not grieve the Holy Spirit by being envious of the goodness of others, but rather continually seek to better ourselves for the glory of God.

- As a child, I recall watching "The Flying Nun," the silly sitcom starring Sally Field. Fifty years later, the "The Singing Nuns" appeared at the White House Christmas Tree Lighting, held annually since 1923. Founded in 1997, the **Dominican Sisters of Mother Mary of the Eucharist** (Ann Arbor, MI) are distinguished for their orthodoxy, traditional habits and outstanding ministry as teachers. They opened a brand new foundation at Saint Agnes School, their first in Minnesota. Today, they number 120 sisters, whose average age is 30!
- Did Thanksgiving travel tire you out? Consider the InSight Lander. After completing its six-month 301,223,981-mile **journey to Mars**, it nailed Monday's landing! The probe travelled at 14,000 MPH and had only six minutes to slow down. If it is only 90 million miles to Mars as the crow flies, who took the wrong turn to Pluto? Wait, that's no longer a planet ...never mind. The first photos of the landscape indicate there is lots of available land for your dream getaway!
- It's 2540 A.D. all over again...as in Aldous Huxley! A Chinese researcher claims to have successfully **altered an embryo** to eliminate the CCR5 gene in hopes of making the children resistant to HIV, smallpox, and cholera. Don't be fooled by the apparent altruism. It is indeed a brave new world as this genetically altered baby raises serious ethical issues as eugenics inches ever closer to reality.
- Yes, it is confusing when Holydays lack the phrase "of obligation" when falling on a Saturday or Monday. But that exception never applies to **Immaculate Conception** or Christmas—they are always holydays of obligation. Mary, under the title of Immaculate Conception, is the patroness of this country. We will offer **three Masses**: Friday December 7 at 5:15 p.m. (anticipatory); Saturday December 8 at 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.
- The **Josephite Brothers and Priests** marked 125 years of ministry to the African-American community. They were assisted in the early days by St. Katherine Drexel, who donated from her family fortune to support the community. Congratulations!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector