

Who cares? The sin of sloth: The sin of sloth

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

At the Christian Century lecture in September, about 200 people gathered for a festive evening to meet author Kathleen Norris. Her topic that evening was not exactly festive, however. She spoke personally, thoughtfully and deliberately about sloth and its spiritual expression, acedia (see her [article](#) in this issue).

I've been thinking about her presentation for months now and realized that the ancient church was right in thinking sloth is serious business, serious enough to be one of the seven deadly sins. I recall that the church's General Confession used to say, "We confess our sinful nature, prone to evil and slothful in good." I always thought "slothful in good" was a very helpful phrase.

I was reminded of an essay by Harvey Cox in which he observed that the Greek root of sloth means "not caring." Cox said that sloth is the lackadaisical refusal to live up to one's essential humanity. Sin may involve pride, the tendency in every one of us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but sin also involves the refusal to be fully human, to be the responsible moral agents God created us to be. The human predicament is not simply that we are vain, selfish and egocentric, that we want to be gods and are altogether too full of ourselves, but that we don't live fully enough or aim high enough, that we refuse to acknowledge our potential and our responsibility to be God's co-workers in creation.

In a wonderful, whimsical series on the seven deadly sins in the *New York Times* several years ago, Thomas Pynchon wrote about sloth, and he observed that there are no symposia on sloth, no sloth task forces, no government hearings on sloth. Maybe sloth is not a big deal. But then he pointed out that whenever totalitarianism arises, it is due to the failure of ordinary citizens to take responsibility. They've been slothful.

In some places in the U.S., only 35 percent of the eligible voters cast ballots in the recent election. The best turnout ever was around 60 percent. The problem here is

not pride, but moral laziness. Sloth, to be precise.

Norris quotes Evelyn Waugh: "The malice of sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty (though that can be a symptom of it) but in the refusal of joy. It is allied to despair." I am grateful for Norris's honesty about her experience, and for reminding us of an ancient concept with relevance for all of us today.