

Glittering vices: A parlor game

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 5, 2003](#) issue

The seven deadly sins got their name not from the Bible but from ancients of the church. These early Christians listed sins that were at the head (*caput*) of a column, sins from which others flowed. We translate that concept as “capital sins.” The capital-deadly sins are indeed deadly, and deserve attention.

We do not have to take them as they are, however. W. C. Fields once said he’d been studying the Bible for years, looking for a loophole. The French have recently begun to set a precedent for loophole-seeking, or at least lessening the brunt of the deadly sins. The French? Mainly a set of French people who have formed *De la Question Gourmande* (*New York Times*, March 6), devoted to the cause of getting the Vatican to remove from the sin list what is in English, “gluttony,” in French, “la gourmandise.” The secretary-general of the group says “the pope was not unsympathetic.”

Writer Mary Blume quotes Catherine Soulier and Lionel Poilane: “Gourmandise connotes not gluttony but a warmhearted approach to the table, to receiving and giving pleasure through good company and food.” That’s not far from biblical definitions of hospitality, and is surely a conscience-easing redefinition.

Why stop with gluttony? Try “pride,” another of the deadlies. Why not take “pride” off the list and replace it with “self-esteem.” Self-esteem, let’s say, “connotes not pride but a warmhearted approach to self-love, to receiving and giving pleasure through following Jesus’ word to love the neighbor as one’s self.”

When choosing their favorite sin, some might say “sloth,” thinking that it means being lazy, lolling in the tub too long, sleeping late. Alas, that won’t work. “Sloth” is a bad translation of *acedia* or *accidie*, the “noonday demon,” what Aquinas defined as sadness in the face of spiritual good. Deadly sloth demands spiritual therapy and the grace of God, not downgrading.

“Lust”: We learned how illiterate our culture is about the Sermon on the Mount when the media mavens took after Jimmy Carter for confessing to what Jesus regarded as

a human universal. But the English word “lust” does have an ugly sound. The French, who have a way of coming up with words that make none of the sins sound deadly, call it *la volupté*. We could make lust respectable by calling it “eros” and saying that it “connotes warmhearted desire that can be redirected toward good goals.”

Try this for a parlor game: let each participant pick her or his favorite candidate for removal from the list. Anger? Therapists tell us that anger can be therapeutic. But the Gospels have Jesus saying so many bad things about anger that the therapists might seek a new word. Maybe the French can come up with something as redemptive as “gourmandise” is for “gluttony.” And even the pope might smile.

Avarice? The Christian marketing people might substitute “competition,” and thus redeem it. Envy? That too has to be part of competition and thus of What Makes America Great. Call it “striving for excellence.”

Soulier says that if gluttony does not lead to crapulence, the vice of drinking to inebriation or eating to excess, “it deserves to be on a par with the theological virtues.” Virtues being “in” these years, it might be a good idea to find the theological virtue hidden inside the seven capital vices and live blithely and antinomianly.

The French, says Blume, think that those who too readily accuse others of gluttony show “the joylessness . . . that they traditionally associate with Protestant countries.” If joylessness is part of the Protestant package, I’ll vote for the French way. And not even confess or repent.