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Knowing, Accepting, and Improving Yourself

A Step-by-Step Guide
to Conquering Your Vices
and Harnessing Your Virtues

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Liguori

Imprimi Potest:

Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial
Denver Province, the Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057

To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

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Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress

p ISBN 978-0-7648-2608-5
e ISBN 978-0-7648-7041-5

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Translated from the Spanish version of the book, *Vicios y Virtudes*, published by Libros Liguori.

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.

Printed in the United States of America
19 18 17 16 15 / 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

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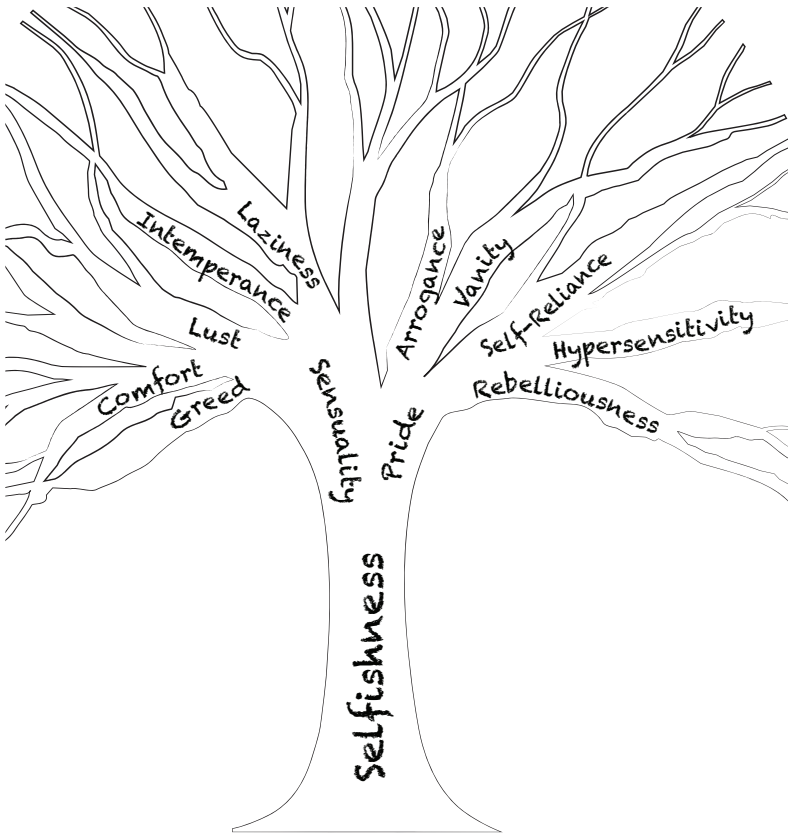
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THE TREE OF VICES



5. LAZINESS

An Unremarkable Life

Laziness is a worm that eats the substance out of our lives. It is the first offspring of sensuality. Laziness is defined as indifference, apathy, or negligence of our daily obligations. It can also be defined as sloth, neglect, or carelessness in our actions or activities. It is the defining characteristic of the “couch potato,” the deadbeat, and the slacker. Without a doubt, it is a very familiar vice.

Despite its appearances, laziness is a life choice. Just as we can choose something pleasurable, we can also choose an attitude of indifference, apathy, or negligence. No one is coerced into it against their will. Some lazy people can be rude and crude, exuding their indifference. Others can be more refined, even sophisticated, and they practice their laziness in a socially acceptable way.

The lazy minimalists are ruled by the law of minimal effort. Anything they do or make—be it a product, service, or anything else—could be more complete, better quality, or more nicely finished, but is not. I have an eye for detail, and I always look for finishing touches. I am fortunate to have lived in several different countries and seen many cities. I have a habit of noticing the details of roads, curbs, and sidewalks, like how recently the lane dividers have been painted or whether or not the sidewalk is full of cracks and worn. There are huge differences between cities and even more so between countries. In theory, it requires the same materials, design, and work for

each; however, the finishing touches are very different! Is it a matter of supervision? Perhaps. But to me, it's a matter of attitude and industriousness. Laziness can become a community, even cultural, issue, leaving its seal on the attitudes and behaviors of entire populations. It is the seal of neglect.

The second type of lazy person is the messy one. This person is identified with disarray. I often wondered as a child what my mother meant when she came into my room, yelled with frustration, "This place is a pigsty!" and forced me to tidy it up. My mom may have gone overboard in her efforts for cleanliness, but I am still grateful she demanded it! Messiness can be as addictive as any other vice. Persons who are lazy make themselves believe that order is a characteristic of obsessive people, and they are not like that. Their desk, bedroom, office, time, and activities are subject to improvisation, and as a result, the random impulse of an unstructured personality.

The selectively lazy is a more peculiar type. This type of laziness is not a full lifestyle but instead focuses on certain areas, for example, the hard workers who refuse to do any kind of physical exercise. Others suffer from mental laziness. They diligently follow orders but are apathetic when it comes to thinking on their own. Additionally, some suffer from spiritual laziness and indifference, which is an attitude of negligence toward religious practice, prayer, or any other pious activity.

Possibly the most dismal type of lazy person is the inactive one. This person is constantly searching for opportunities to rest, so much so that the concept of time is lost. Life passes by in dullness and monotony. Inactivity eats away at even the best of the person's abilities. It is very likely that at the end of a seventy- or eighty-year journey through life, this individual will be surprised by how much, or really how little, has been accomplished.

The word “service” does not appear in the dictionary of the lazy person, because to serve, laziness must be stripped away. The lazy individual is almost “antiservice,” not coming into this world to serve but to be served. In this way, the lazy lose the best opportunity for humans to love, which is through service to others. The consequences of such an attitude are devastating for everything but above all for marriage, the family, and other close relationships.

I recall a man who had been married for twenty years to an extraordinary but terribly disorganized woman. He was convinced he would have the perfect marriage if only his wife were more organized. He was exhausted from trying to explain his frustrations to her and constantly sorting out her messes. His wife’s behavior was the cause of many disagreements in their marriage. There was nothing else I could suggest but that he overlook this flaw to keep the peace. His experiences led me to a sad conclusion. Almost always, where a lazy person lives there also lives a frustrated spouse.



Am I Lazy?

- Do I live by the law of minimal effort?
- Am I disorganized with my time?
- Do I easily leave things for tomorrow and never go back to them?
- Are my desk, work table, drawers, and other personal items in disarray?
- Do I take care of my personal appearance?
- Am I negligent with my obligations?
- Do I find myself doing nothing more often than I'm engaged in activities?
- Do I dodge intellectual work?
- Do I feel apathetic about my spiritual life?

6. INTemperance

Everything to the Extreme

Aristotle referred to human beings as “rational animals.” This is not a novel definition, but it does help us understand why advertisements aim so many messages and provocations at a certain undeniable part of our personality. The real potential customer is the animal we carry inside.

As humans, we are both physical and spiritual beings. As such, we cannot deny that we have innate ties to the physical world, even the animal kingdom. In fact, if you were to take a simplified view of humans from a purely scientific standpoint, it would be easy to think we are nothing more than animals. We are slightly more complex than some, but animals nonetheless.

That would not be the whole truth. We are different from animals in essential ways, and the distinction does not depend only on the presence of a spiritual soul. Our physical body is also different in that it is positively human. In fact, more than having a body, we are corporeal; more than instincts, we have tendencies; and although our ability to sense and perceive is fundamentally physical, it is also spiritual in a certain way.

Being corporeal means having needs and tendencies that manifest themselves in the form of sensual appetites. Thirst, hunger, and sexual impulses are appetites that reside in our physical body and fulfill functions essential to the survival of the individual as well as the species.

From this perspective, every appetite has a reason for being and is good in its own way. However, this dimension of ourselves has also been disordered by selfishness. Our senses have become inclined toward evil. That is to say, our sensual appetites are bent toward a disordered search for pleasure with regrettable and even fatal outcomes.

In classical antiquity, the Greeks distinguished between what was Apollonian and what was Dionysian, referring to the dichotomy between Apollo (god of sun) and Dionysus (god of wine, also known as Bacchus). Apollo was the god of order, moderation, and balance. Dionysus was the god of excess, including excesses in pride and arrogance, which the Greeks called “hubris.” Even today, we all know the terrible strength and destructive power of hubris, which resides in the shadows of our sensuality. It’s easy to feel weak in the face of those fierce tendencies, our senses that drag us along with the strength of five indomitable beasts.

When I turned eight years old, my father planned a party for me in our back yard. One of the games we played, a variation of tug-of-war, required us to find a partner and be tied back to back. The object of the game was to pull against each other and drag your opponent to your goal post, about ten feet away. When it came time to pick my opponent, I chose someone younger, but much bigger, than I. He may have only been seven years old, but he was built like a bull! It only took him seconds to drag me to his goal line. As my dad untied us he whispered in my ear, “Next time, choose more carefully.”

Unfortunately, when it comes to our senses we have no choice. We have to brace ourselves and fight. When our senses and impulses push us toward harmful or inappropriate behaviors, we must do battle with restraint and control. When we lack control over our sensual appetites, it is called “intemperance.” The more these appetites go unchecked, the more intemperate we are, the more our senses drag us along, and we

become blind to the damage that is being done. An intemperate person ends up becoming both the victim and the slave of his or her senses.

One of the most well-known expressions of intemperance is gluttony, or excessive eating. Gluttony is a moral disorder and does not apply to those people who are compulsive eaters due to a psychological or medical disorder. We see gluttony in history when we read about feasts in the Roman Empire that would last for days. Those in attendance would vomit once full so they could continue eating. We might not see that exact type of excess today, but we do see other excesses such as spending exorbitant amounts of money on the smallest delicacy or a voracious intake of junk food. Some people are only deterred by seeing threatening numbers when they weigh themselves. Others have lost all restraint and given themselves over entirely to obesity with all its unfortunate consequences for their health. Obesity, we should mention, has become the most unpunished serial killer of our times.

Another way in which intemperance commonly manifests itself is through alcohol abuse. There are degrees of abuse from occasional intoxication to outright alcoholism. It is difficult to determine the actual roots of alcoholism. Some research points to a hereditary predisposition combined with upbringing and social pressures, which is seen especially in young adults. In some cases, alcohol starts as a temporary relief to stresses and hardships before becoming a hardship itself. As this behavior worsens, the addiction to alcohol goes from being psychological to physiological, resulting in a physical need. At that point, willpower, no matter how strong, is not enough. One must seek professional help and the assistance of a support group.

The use of illegal drugs is another manifestation of intemperance. In the case of some narcotics, intemperance is aided by the substance itself. Some narcotics can become instantly addictive, and even if used only once a dangerous new addic-

tion can be born. As with alcohol, there is a psychological and physiological dependency that willpower alone is not enough to stop.

There is one more manifestation of intemperance, which if left unchecked evolves into the vice discussed in the next chapter. This form of intemperance is called the “wandering eye.” Out of curiosity or simply a distracted gaze, our eyes tend to wander everywhere. In today’s world, brimming with suggestive fashion and erotically charged advertisements, it takes mere seconds to find something that excites our senses. A wandering eye can vary in intensity, from the brief consent we give ourselves for a casual glance, to consciously and consistently relishing lewd stares when we come across images such as a woman in tight or revealing clothing, a suggestive image on the internet, or an erotic scene at the movies or on television.

The consequences of intemperance are well-known and, in many cases, catastrophic. The more an individual allows sensual appetites to take control, the more his or her intelligence becomes muddled and the will weakened. Such persons become a pawn in the hands of their senses, slowly consumed by vices that sicken body, mind, and soul.

The damages caused by intemperance go well beyond the individual. His or her spouse, children, and friends all suffer from the intemperate person’s failings. They all get frustrated. They all lose their patience. The fallout that results from intemperance gives clear evidence that we carry our own worst enemy inside us.

Am I intemperate?

- Do I wander through life trying to capture any and every sensation that brings me pleasure?
- Do I have a wandering eye? Do I fall prey to exploring what may not be appropriate?
- Do I easily give in to indulgences even if I know they are not good for me?
- Do I give in to gluttony?
- Do I knowingly eat foods that are bad for me without moderation?
- Do I turn to alcohol when it feels like I am losing control?
- Do I use drugs?