

## SPIRITUAL GLOBALIZATION OF THE SEVEN CAPITAL SINS

by Joan Chittister, OSB

As religious persons we need to look again at the basis of social broken-ness that is found in every major religious stream in the world throughout time, that we ourselves begin to see the spiritual link between the personal and the political. As religious teachers, counselors, directors, Christians, we take another look at what we use to call the seven capital sins, the seven deadly sins, but this time on two levels rather than simply one: the personal and the global. Look again at envy, pride, lust, gluttony, covetousness, anger and sloth, and the way we teach them to our children.

### Global Envy

Envy – wanting what someone else has. In Bangladesh, each person each year consumes an average of six and a half pounds of meat and consider themselves “blessed.” In America, each person consumes an average of 260 pounds of meat a year, and think they are entitled to it. So we level other people’s forests for grazing ground because our own isn’t enough for us. We laugh at the vegetarians in our midst who have changed the family menus as well as their own. And we never see it as the beginning of global sin.

We uphold criminal governments politically for our own good – as we did in El Salvador and Chile, and the Philippines, and Nicaragua – rather than recognize the needs of the people of those countries. When we impose our values and structures in return for trade and profit and power, *isn’t that a form of envy?* Don’t we need to think and write and talk spiritually about that?

### Global Pride

Pride is the need to dominate and coerce others on a personal level. But on the global level, isn’t it also the mania for national superiority? For racial superiority? For being number one? For having strawberries in January, whatever the cost to the pickers? Americans spend \$8 billion a year on cosmetics. That’s \$2 billion more than the amount we need to provide a basic education for everyone in the world. If we want to be progressive, don’t we need to think and write and teach and talk spiritually about that?

### Global Lust

Lust is clearly the exploitation of another for the sake of my physical gratification. We are beginning to recognize it when it’s date rape, or pornography, or selfish sensuality. But is there yet enough spiritual conscience in us *to see lust as the national passion for instantaneous gratification that justifies the exploitation of whole peoples?* So that we can have the cheap cash crops and conveniences we demand, we are raping their lands and their futures – without ever having to follow the legislation that is enabling it, without ever having to pay the decent wages, pensions, or benefits to those people to get them. *Isn’t it the exploitation that comes from lust that leads to the feminization of poverty,* and the loss of feminine resources and feminine values in a world that is reeling toward its own death from the institutionalization of purely masculine values? Two-thirds of the minimum wage workers, who are earning an average across this country of \$5.50 per hour, are single mothers with three children. To support those children and be self-sufficient, that mother needs to earn \$16 an hour. But we have politicians who tell people on Monday, “We’re not picking up your health bill, your dental bill, your milk bill, your kids’ bill.” And on Tuesday those same politicians go to those same cameras and say, “Every one of you people on welfare have to get a full-time job.” You can’t have it two ways. You can’t have mothers in the home, and working mothers on starvation legislation. Get it together spiritually, before you vote on anything.

Isn’t it the institutionalization of lust that makes it possible to condemn the use of condoms and sex education in our schools to say a word from the pulpit about the rape hotels in Bosnia? Isn’t it lust that drains the life out of a man for a company, and then when he is middle-aged, throws him away, so the company doesn’t have to pay him the pension he spent all those years to earn? Are you sucking up someone else’s life and calling it good business, and the American dream, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century culture?

### Global Gluttony

Gluttony, the over-consumption of food, leads to waste and bloatedness and misuse of resources and misuse of resources on a personal level. But it is also surely at the base of the lack of distribution of surplus in this country that we refuse to the dying in Ethiopia and North Korea and the destitute in Haiti and the farmers in the former Soviet Union. All the while Americans and Europeans are spending \$17 billion a year on pet food, which is \$4 billion more than would be needed to provide basic health and nutrition for everyone in the world. Unless we are preaching, teaching, talking and organizing for these things – how can we say that we are developing spiritually for this culture? Someone wrote of this culture: “We do not have war on poverty; we have a war on poor people.” And what are Christians, as churches, doing about it – as we say in our prayers and publish our creeds and catechisms? The last act of a dying institution, John Garner says, is to get out a new edition of the rule book.

### Global Covetousness

We speak of covetousness as a lack of a sense of enough, and we know that on a personal level covetousness leads us to the sinful brink of hoarding. But what’s the difference between that and the national demon that is fueling a military budget in quest for world dominance? If we forgave the bilateral debts of the entire Third World to us, that would equal \$6.8 billion. Do you know what that would cost us? It would cost the U.S. Treasury the price of three B-2 Stealth Bombers for a fleet in which we already have 24 such things in peacetime.

### Global Anger

Anger we recognize as the cultivation of and eschatological sense of righteousness and judgment, putting ourselves in the place of the patient justice of God. “Vengeance is mine; I will repay you,” we remind one another. But what has happened to the national moral fiber when whatever evil we and our newspapers say of the others – the Japanese, the Chinese, the Arabs, the Serbs – is counted as national virtue? What about the sin of demonizing our enemies to justify the military-industrial complex and of our determining our immigration quotas accordingly?

### Global Sloth

We abhor sloth and the assumption that if anyone has the right to live off the efforts of others, it is sheer laziness. It is a lack of responsibility. But where is Christian leadership in the building of a new world view about the sinfulness of multinational structures that are living off the backs of the poor by giving unjust wages and benefits but will spend \$165 billion of bail-out welfare for the rich in the Savings and Loans. How do we take for granted the unequal treatment of women and the blasphemy of absorbing a woman’s life at lesser pay for the convenience of others, moralizing about that kind of institutionalized servitude in the name of God’s will? By the year 2050, in your grandchildren’s lives, eight billion of the projected nine billion in the world will be living in developing countries. Over half of them will be women with no influence whatsoever on the systems that control their lives, and we take for granted our own feminine gains, small as they are financially, and say nothing on behalf of women who cannot say a thing.

### Conclusion

So, we go on blindly as a culture in our search for goodness, oblivious of new moral imperatives. Our institutions counsel and educate for individuality and autonomy and control and independence in a world that needs community and mutuality and cooperation and interdependence and human responsibility and a new spirituality for contemplative c-creation. Our sermons float high above the fray because if we said what is being said here, what would happen in our churches?

An ancient people tell the story of a seeker who asked, “Before I follow you, tell me, does your God work miracles?” And the Holy One said, “Well it all depends on what you call a miracle. Some people say a miracle is when God does the will of the people. We say that a miracle is when the people do the will of God.”

The role of progressive Christians is not to die until we have assured the rise of these questions in a dynamic spirituality as the next generation comes to grips with them. Let us find meaning in life by being about something greater than ourselves. For the sake of the people, the poor, the planet, I am begging you to see your contribution to Christianity as the spiritual globalization of the seven capital sins, to have in you the holy anger that makes the Christian life of the new millennium even holier than the last. Though nothing we do changes the past, everything we do changes the future. So do it!