

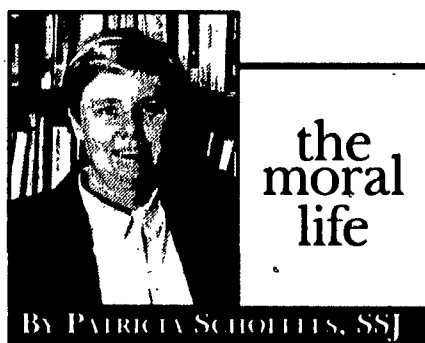
COLUMNISTS

Greed can throw us off course

I've been thinking lately about trying to understand in today's terms what we used to call "the seven capital sins" or the seven "deadly" sins. Like many tasks I claim, I keep putting this one off until I have more time. Then I came across a phrase in Paul's Letter to the Colossians that I hadn't noticed for a long time, and this reminded me of the long-postponed project.

The passage is Colossians 3:5 — "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry." I began to question why fornication, impurity, passion and evil desire get away with not being identified with idolatry, while greed gets stuck with it. Ordinarily I, like many Catholics, have been trained to assume that sins of the body are pretty serious, and other ones, like greed, are pretty hard to define and probably not so bad.

But here in one of the lists of vices that appear in Paul's theology, greed seems to be singled out as idolatry. I suppose that at the time when Colossians was written there was a general understanding that this particular list of vices needed to be considered and eliminated from the lives



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of those who were seeking to be baptized into Christianity. There must at that time have been a particular association between greed and worshipping false gods.

In today's terms, that's a bit harder to fit together. I don't hear a broad cultural debate that wonders what greed looks like, and I hardly ever hear anyone worry about which false gods he or she is worshipping. Moreover, I have never heard anyone associate the two.

Still, there may be some important wisdom for today in this ancient association reflected in Colossians. In many ways, greed does not even seem like a vice today. It almost appears to be no problem at

all. From some points of view, it may actually look more like a virtue.

I say this because sometimes it appears to me that we live in a time when the only reasonable goal for life is portrayed as securing the means to be able to buy as much as we can. If today's dominant culture were the only sources to help me find ends worthy of my life, I might even fail to realize that "increased buying power" is not the only reason for living.

In this sense, then, there may be very good reason to associate greed with idolatry. Without choosing to worship a false god, we can unconsciously accept an ideology that gives us a way of looking at life and acting that moves us away from our true nature and purpose. Part of the wisdom behind the Colossians passage must surely be that greed — and not the more famous "sins of the flesh" — can supply an entire false worldview.

Of course, considering what we mean by greed is important. From the earliest attempts to name this part of human experience, experts have defined greed as an "inordinate and insatiable longing for wealth; avaricious and covetous desire." In

my terms, this computes to an obsession with possessing things that is out of proportion and unable to be satisfied.

The trouble today is that the power to possess things, which is of itself not bad at all, takes on a value in our lives that puts it way out of proportion to other goods, and it fills us with an inability ever to be satisfied with what we have. Furthermore, the way greed exists as a sin is hardly that we "freely choose to do it," as if it were one single act of possessiveness. Instead, the longing for wealth becomes an entire way of life, determining our other choices, impinging on our relationships, clouding our vision of our real purpose on earth and alienating us from our own true nature.

Greed causes us to worship a whole host of false gods and can cause us to create a world for ourselves where our clear moral purpose is hidden from us. In a culture permeated with materialism, we need more than ever to focus consciously, deliberately and often on what are the real reasons for living.

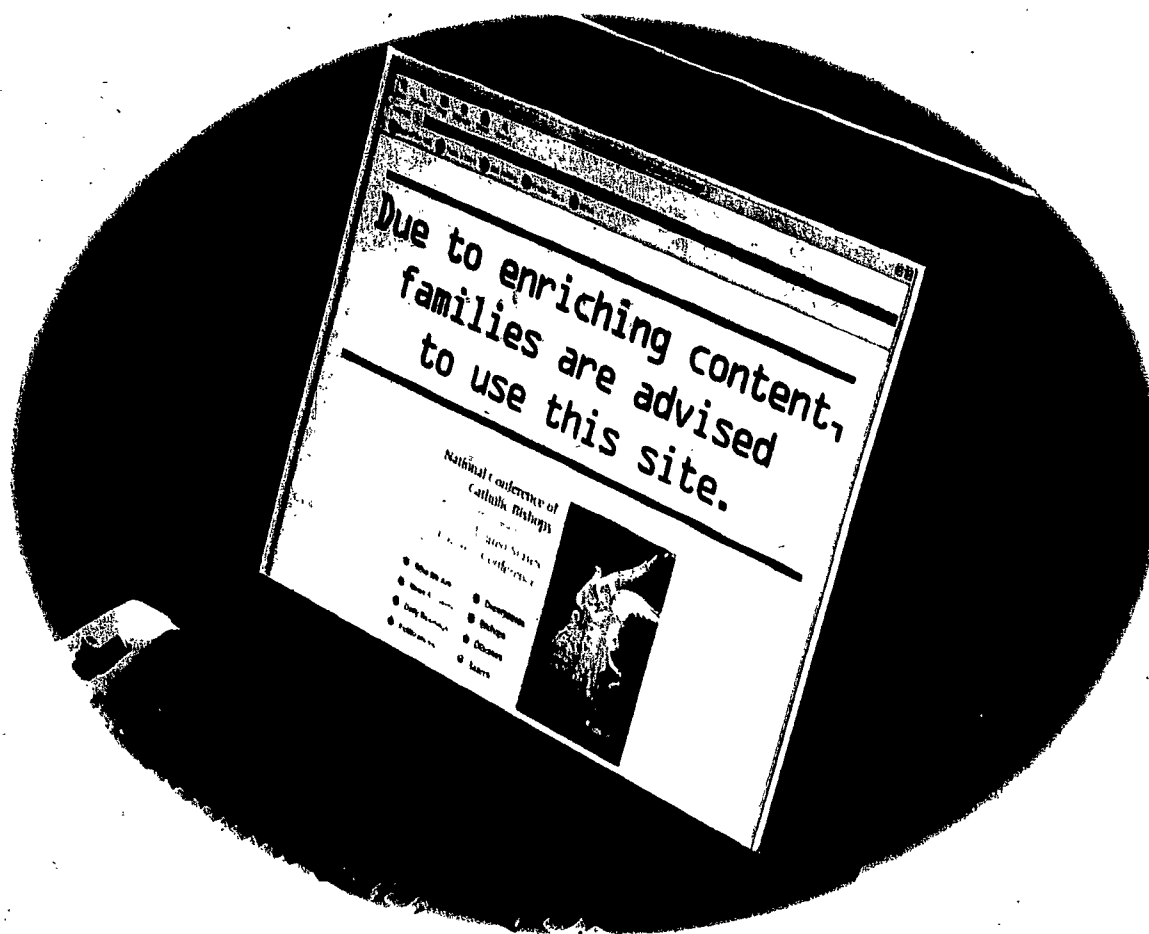
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