

COLUMNISTS

Labor Day spurs study of sloth

With Labor Day upon us, I thought fruitful use of this column might be to offer a reflection on the theme of labor and work as it has developed over the course of church history. Unfortunately I couldn't maintain much interest in that topic.

This might be because of a personal aversion to the arrival of fall and the sense of moving from the more relaxed tempo of summer to the sense of "labor" that arrives with September. So with my own mood being one of regret about "getting to work" I decided to focus more on the church's thought about the sin of sloth.

This led to a kind of dead-end, since I know little about the church's thought about sloth.

I began by consulting the *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* article on "Deadly Sins." The research on this topic is presented by George Evans, a professor at St. John's Seminary in Boston. I learned that the medievals liked to devise categories and classifications for almost everything, so they used the Creed, the Commandments, and the "Seven Capital Sins" as a framework.

This catalogue of "deadly sins" did not present each vice as a conscious or voluntary choice. Each was more a basic ten-



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

dency toward evil, or a habit that led to such a concrete decision. Qualifying as "capital sins" alongside sloth were envy, pride, anger, greed, gluttony and lust.

Sloth is more than just laziness. It relates to a lack of care for duties and obligations, to the degree that the slothful person exhibits signs of rancor, passivity and sluggishness. The basic lack of care was understood to be the source of restlessness and even aggression. It was thought also to engender a sense of weariness and a general dissatisfaction with things.

Factors from today's lifestyles that can engender sloth, according to Evans, include: insufficient or poorly used leisure time, a world view too narrow in its horizons, holding expectations for oneself or

others that are simply too high, and anticipating that love will flourish without sacrifice. Evans also lists dependence on counterfeit satisfactions for life's deepest yearnings as contributing to sloth.

Other authors echo Evans' assessment. Michael Casey quotes Cassian's Institutes, which lists typical traits of those who exhibit signs of sloth. Among these are seeking escapist activities to help avoid challenging situations, short attention spans, and a failure to concentrate on particular tasks and bring them to completion. According to the medieval wisdom, slothful individuals often display a low level of personal satisfaction and an inability to commit to a way of life or a community.

Helping to move one from sloth are regular consideration of ideals and values, the search for creativity amid one's activities in life, and provision for truly restorative leisure. On this, I am reminded of much of today's self-help literature, which often indicts our contemporary lifestyles for being too intensely and exclusively concentrated on work during the week, so that we engage in reckless and pointless "crashing" into the few moments of leisure we eke out on the weekends.

I'm not entirely pleased with the results

of my foray into thinking about the sin of sloth. I'm not even sure anymore that I am actually "guilty" of sloth. I am sure, however, that we all might benefit from trying to learn more about our own motivations and our reactions to the situations we face. The medieval mindset understood better than we do that our basic tendencies toward evil are rarely conquered once and for all. Rather, they often require ongoing struggle and concentration.

I wonder, however, whether some consideration of an alternative list of "chief sins" might not be appropriate. These personal and social evils would reflect not so much our individual preoccupations, distortions and self-delusions, but more the broader society's version of these. As an alternative list of "chief sins for today," Evans suggests cruelty, hypocrisy, snobbery, treachery, self-negation and aimlessness.

I'm a bit wary of making promises I can't keep, but investigating the moral implications of some of these might be wonderfully appropriate for sometime in the future — maybe next Labor Day!

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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from page 12

1. b, 2. f, 3. g, 4. e, 5. d, 6. a, 7. h, 8. c