

The Seven Deadly Sins for Music Ministry Members

Article written by M.D. Ridge – appeared in Today's Liturgy publication

(This article was shared with meeting attendees, who broke up into small discussion groups to discuss each individual category. Notes from the group discussions are shown in red font.)

The old *Baltimore Catechism* had lists for everything. They were a useful shorthand for living a mindful life, maintaining awareness of commandments, virtues, gifts of the Holy Spirit, spiritual & corporal works of mercy, and so on. And sins, lots of sins – Mortal, Venial, Deadly sins.

Anger, covetousness, envy, gluttony, lust, pride, and sloth were called deadly sins because they were fatal to spiritual development. In music ministry, some acts and attitudes can hinder the spiritual and musical development of the group, and every individual in it. I realize that's a strong statement, but I've seen gossip wreck an otherwise functional choir; I've seen arrogance flourish, freezing outgrowth. Naming these attitudes and acts is the first step toward combating them.

While you can probably come up with your own list of deadly sins for music ministry members, but for today, we will consider the following: Gossip, Arrogance, Envy, Lateness, Laziness, Helplessness, Spreading your Germs.

Gossip:

Little will fragment the members of a choir or ensemble as much as gossip. It may be malicious, or merely rumor, or even true, but it doesn't really matter. Gossip itself will eventually poison relationships within the group.

Why? Because it inevitably sets one member against another. It divides the group into cliques (those who 'know' and those who don't), and it destroys trust. Trashing someone else may feel delicious for a moment, but you could be next!

It takes courage to stop gossip in its tracks. Some strategies may include:

- Respond with 'What a hurtful thing to say!' or 'I don't mean to be rude, but I don't listen to gossip,' and change the subject.
- Set zero-tolerance policies on gossip within your choir or ensemble.
- Work toward increasing trust relationships within the group.

Group Discussion feedback:

- The larger the group, the greater the opportunity for gossip.
- Do not judge (the gossiper), accept, but do not eliminate.
- Determine what kind of 'criticism' works best for the individual or the group.
- Don't feed the problem but determine what to do about it.
- Deal with the gossiper in a way that doesn't alienate the person.
- Gossip can destroy not only the choir but can spread to the congregation.
- Consider turning a concern into care and pray for the person.
- The leader (of choir or ensemble) can be a role model for others.
- Re-direct comments made by people.
- Approach the situation with love.
- Set ground rules for your choir/ensemble. Director is the role model and must diffuse the actions.
- Being good to everyone can make a difference in their lives.

Arrogance:

Arrogance shows up in an assortment of ways. Inattention, for instance, says to the director and other members of the group, 'I know all this stuff; it's not important ... and neither are you.' Impatience says, 'I am too important to have my time wasted like this.' Arrogance shows up when a singer skips rehearsal, but still expects to sing on Sunday. Arrogance communicates a terrible message to the other members of the group: 'You and your feelings are not important enough for me to consider.'

Buffing one's ego at the expense of the group cannot be allowed. Consider the following:

- An arrogant director usually has frequent personnel turnover. People who are being consistently put down or ignored don't stick around, nor should they.
- An arrogant singer or instrumentalist may be unaware of his or her effect on the group – the director needs to confront such attitudes and encourage the person to be more mindful of others.

Group Discussion feedback:

- Some directors/ensemble leaders do not recognize that people have voices and valuable inputs. Some leaders have actually 'shushed' other members from speaking up.
- Even though many people may think or tell you that 'you walk on water,' remember that you don't.
- 'I don't need to come' attitude doesn't help others in the group.
- Some people think they 'know it all.' There is no passion for the music, for the group, for the liturgy.
- Arrogance and envy go hand in hand.

Envy:

'Why does she get all the solos?' 'Who died and made him king?' Envy is the corrosive feeling that someone else has something that should belong to you. It breeds resentment and eats the soul. Worse, envy is a denial of charity. What's Christian about resenting another's musical gifts or hard work?

Eradicating envy takes constant practice. Consider strategies to rejoice in the gifts of others, to develop an attitude of humility.

Group Discussion feedback:

- Stay grounded on 'Why am I here?' or 'How can I help others get to heaven?'
- Recognize inequality in the distribution of gifts/talents.
- Can become difficult when an out-of-town guest is brought in for big occasions. Regular members wonder if they matter.
- Develop your own personal spirituality, which can lead to more acceptance.
- Communication helps clarify decisions that are made.
- Bring more young people in. Don't let envy destroy the choir.
- Some directors/ensemble leaders actually discourage growth of the choir by not letting new ideas and people in, or they will pretend he/she initiated the idea.
- Some directors/ensemble leaders may feel other singers are a threat to his/her position and will never acknowledge or praise people who help him/her.

Lateness:

This could be considered under the heading of ‘Arrogance,’ but it really deserves its own category. Everyone is likely to be late to rehearsals once in a while: traffic, weather, car problems, kids, etc can delay even the most consistent choir member. But chronic lateness is disruptive. It destroys the group’s concentration and can create gaps in the offender’s knowledge that can show up in very peculiar ways on Sunday (‘Oops! Were we supposed to omit that verse? Sorry ...’).

Frequent lateness can also be a passive-aggressive way of drawing attention to oneself. Some people secretly enjoy the bustle and buzz of making an entrance.

Consider these strategies to combat lateness.

- Director/leader simply brings everything to a halt, waiting in silence until the latecomer is in place.
- Director/leader visits privately with the latecomer after rehearsal, pointing out the discourtesy to those who managed to arrive on time.
- Establish a policy where a latecomer waits to enter the rehearsal room until the piece or section being rehearsed is over before taking their usual place.

Group Discussion feedback:

- Begin rehearsals (as you wait for someone) to go over parts, go over something that is a review. Be flexible with your plans.
- Lateness might be due to difficult circumstances. Think with your heart.
- Make sure someone leads the person who is late.
- Communication is important. Let the director/ensemble leader know you will be late or absent.
- Start on time. End on time.
- Consider that there may be extenuating circumstances.

Laziness:

What’s the big deal? You show up, you sing, you go home, right?... Wrong. Lazy folks do the same things again and again and don’t learn anything. Lazy directors plan the same music year in, year out, and wonder why people get bored and leave the group.

Making music demands physical, emotional, and spiritual attention. Consider the following:

- Working hard to keep up with the group, taking music home to practice if necessary.
- Being alert to signals during the liturgy.
- Working on good posture & physical fitness so you can sing or play your best.
- For directors/leaders, looking for music that best suits the abilities of the group’s members, challenging them without discouraging them.

Group Discussion feedback:

- Find ways to overcome people’s unwillingness to challenge oneself.

Helplessness:

‘Oh, I don’t know how to read music, I’m just a volunteer.’ What a cop-out! Helplessness tends to be under the radar but shows up in a crisis. The pianist falls ill – without keyboard, some singers lag further and further behind. They don’t own the music – they’re just letting others (or the keyboard) drag them along.

The antidote to helplessness is the determination to learn. The more you know, the better equipped you are to do your ministry. Consider the following strategies:

- Learn to read music – take a course, get a book, ask a good reader in the choir to teach you.
- Learn everything you can about liturgy.
- Learn how music is sorted & stored, how the sound system works, how the choir book is organized.
- Directors/leaders can empower members – involving them in decisions, teach them in digestible increments, explore the meaning of texts so that phrasing and dynamics make sense.

Group Discussion feedback: *(did not get to this one)*

Spreading your germs:

Isn’t it lovely – at rehearsal or during Mass – to be sitting next to someone who’s sneezing and coughing and spewing? Sharings one’s germs with the entire choir is not a sign of faithfulness and generosity; it can be flat-out harmful.

You may not have the option of staying home but can try avoid close contact. If a rehearsal is really important, listening to the rehearsal from a safe distance may be a possible compromise

You may not have the option of staying home but you can try to avoid close contact.

- Stay home if possible!
- If you have to be at Mass or Rehearsal:
 - Use of hand-sanitizer or N-95 masks
 - If it is a critical rehearsal, listen to the rehearsal from a safe distance.
 - During Mass, avoid shaking hands during the Sign of Peace.

Group Discussion feedback:

- The pandemic made people more aware of communicable disease ‘do’s and don’ts.’
- Singers’ bodies are their instruments.
- Small choirs can distance themselves.
- Communication is important.
- Have products available for those who are sick (cough drops, tissues, etc)
- Send out YouTube versions of music and/or parts to let people practice without the whole group.
- Plan ahead as a director/ensemble leader, to leave ample time to learn something.