

The Catholic dogma of original sin

Reflecting on the dogmas listed by the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*, we come to 'the doctrine on the existence of original sin', with the *Commentary* referencing the Council of Trent. (This doctrine is also essential for understanding Mary's *freedom* from all stain of original sin; Trent explicitly exempted Mary from its teaching. (DS 1516))

Original sin's biblical basis is especially *Genesis* 3 and St Paul's *Letter to the Romans* 5. The *Catechism* tells us: 'The account of the fall in *Genesis* 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man. Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents.' (n. 390) Vatican II affirmed that 'although he was constituted by God in a state of justice, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One'. (*Gaudium et spes* 13)

So we consider first the historical nature of *Genesis*. Regarding its first eleven chapters (which cover everything before Abraham – i.e. Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel; the ancient patriarchs; Noah and the flood; the Tower of Babel), Pius XII had taught: 'Although properly speaking not conforming to the historical method used by the best Greek and Latin writers or by competent authors of our time, [these chapters] do nevertheless pertain to history in a true sense, which however must be further studied and determined by exegetes; the same chapters [use] simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a people but little cultured...' (*Humani Generis* (1950) 38, DS 3898)

So the Church takes a middle path: between insisting on literal interpretation of every detail, versus the other extreme, denying that the things told are historical at all. We looked recently at the dogma that Scripture (understood according to the author's true intention) is free from all error. Pius XII teaches that what the author intended to communicate in *Genesis* 1-11 does 'pertain to history in a true sense', even though the genre differs from modern historical works.

Catholic Faith proclaims that God created all things from nothing at the beginning of time. (Lateran IV, DS 800; Vatican I, DS 3002; 3025) But regarding the *six days* of creation in *Genesis* 1, St Augustine in the early Church gave a non-literal interpretation (*De Genesi ad litteram*); and St Thomas Aquinas affirmed his view as a legitimate one, alongside the more literal interpretation of other Church Fathers (*ST* 1a, 74, 2). Under St Pius X, we find the Magisterium stating that the word 'day' in *Genesis* 1 may be understood non-literally, meaning 'a certain space of time'. (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 30/06/1909, DS 3519)

Concerning the evolution of the human *body*, Pius XII affirmed that discussions of this were not forbidden by the Church; but that 'the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that *souls* are immediately created by God'. (*Humani Generis* 36; cf. St John Paul II, *Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences* 22/10/1996)

We can add that Catholic philosophers such as St Thomas Aquinas have given sound *rational proofs* that human beings have immortal spiritual souls, directly created by God. So regardless of the role of evolution in God's formation of Adam's body, it can be known just by reason, even before faith, that at some definite point God must first have infused the soul. So that transformative moment of special creation was when true human nature first existed: humanity's appearing was not *merely* a gradual process.

The *Catechism* states that ‘from one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth’ (n. 360, quoting *Acts* 17:26). Adam is the one first father of all. Pius XII had rejected the view that after Adam there existed true human beings not descended from him as first parent; or that the figure of ‘Adam’ represented a supposed ‘number of first parents’. It was in no way apparent, he said, how those views could be reconciled with what the sources of revealed truth, and Church doctrine, proposed regarding original sin, ‘which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam...transmitted to all by generation’. (*Humani Generis* 37)

Magisterial teachings had also affirmed a literal interpretation of the special creation of Eve, (*Gen* 2:21-22) whom God ‘miraculously took from the side of Adam when he was locked in sleep’. (Leo XIII, *Arcanum* (1880) 5; cf. DS 443; 3514) The reality of that miracle, rich in symbolism, is no difficulty for God, and (upon analysis) no less believable than the miraculous formation of Christ, the *Second* Adam, from Mary, the *Second* Eve. None of these teachings is ‘disproved’ by reason or science, and nothing prevents us accepting them in the spirit of faith.

Turning to the actual dogmas on original sin from the Council of Trent (found in the infallible definitions of its *Decree* of 1546): these declare that ‘Adam, the first man, by transgressing God’s commandment in Paradise, at once lost the holiness and justice in which he had been constituted’. He incurred ‘the wrath and indignation of God’, bodily death, and ‘captivity in the power of the devil’.

This harmed also his posterity, losing for us that same holiness and justice, transmitting not only ‘death and the punishments of the body’ but ‘sin also, which is the death of the soul’. This sin is ‘one in origin’ but is in each of us as our own, ‘transmitted to all...by propagation, not imitation’. (That is, transmission of original sin comes by the very fact of the passing on of human nature received from Adam; it cannot be reduced to the spreading of bad example.)

Original sin is removed only by ‘the merit of the one mediator’ Jesus Christ, which is applied to us in Baptism. Even infants must be baptised for its remission, ‘for the attainment of life everlasting’. The grace of Baptism remits all that has the nature of sin, leaving the newly-baptised ‘innocent’ and ‘immaculate’, with nothing obstructing them from heaven. There does remain an *inclination* to sin, ‘concupiscence’, against which we make battle with Christ’s grace; but this inclination is not *itself* truly sin, and ‘cannot harm those who do not consent’.

So all that is the defined teaching of Trent (DS 1510-1515); St Paul VI reaffirmed its doctrines at length in his *Credo of the People of God* (1968).

The *Catechism* explores: ‘How did the sin of Adam become the sin of all his descendants? The whole human race is in Adam “as one body of one man”. By this “unity of the human race” all men are implicated in Adam’s sin, as all are implicated in Christ’s justice. Still, the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand...Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state...deprived of original holiness and justice.’ (n. 404)

As for bodily death, ‘even though man’s nature is mortal God had destined him not to die’, by a special gift beyond nature. So human death was ‘contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin’. (*Catechism* n. 1008; cf. *Gaudium et spes* 18) But the *Catechism* reassures us (nn. 420, 412): ‘The victory that Christ won over sin has given us greater blessings than those which sin had taken from us.’ ‘St Paul says, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (*Rom* 5:20); and the *Exsultet* sings, “O happy fault...which gained for us so great a Redeemer!”’