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Man Elevated to Share in the Divine Life

Talk #3

Original Sin and its Consequences



© **Dr. Lawrence Feingold STD**
Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, Archdiocese of St. Louis, Missouri

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Association of Hebrew Catholics • 4120 W Pine Blvd • Saint Louis MO 63108
www.hebrewcatholic.org • ahc@hebrewcatholic.org

Original Sin and its Consequences

Last week we looked at original justice, original sin, and its consequences. We saw that the consequence for original sin was the loss of all the gifts given to Adam and Eve above human nature itself. Those gifts above human nature include supernatural and preternatural gifts. The supernatural gifts are those gifts that mysteriously transmit a share in the divine life. The supreme supernatural gift was sanctifying grace—a participation in the divine nature—by which they were made sons of God and heirs of heaven, to which they would have been elevated after their time in the earthly paradise. From sanctifying grace flow other gifts, among which the most important are the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It is reasonable to think that they also would have received infused moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The preternatural gifts gave to Adam and Eve privileges proper to the angels. These are summarized in the four gifts: immortality, immunity from travail and suffering, infused knowledge, and integrity, by which they were immune from experiencing rebellious and seductive movements of the passions contrary to right reason. As a result of original sin, all of these gifts were lost.

We also saw that the original sin consisted essentially in a desire for moral autonomy, expressed through the metaphor of eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve was tempted with the desire to become like God in determining good and evil for herself, and Adam went along with it. What would be a fitting punishment for the desire to become morally autonomous, as if they were God? The punishment given to them was precisely to let them taste a degree of human autonomy that they hadn't bargained for. They wanted to be left to themselves to determine good and evil, and so their human nature was left to itself, stripped of the gifts that inclined it to the supernatural good, and even stripped of gifts which made it impervious to or immune from natural evils.

What were they left with? They were left with human nature itself, which they transmitted to all their descendants, but bereft of the supernatural and preternatural gifts above human nature with which they were enriched at their creation. Human nature was not essentially corrupted, for we remain essentially what Adam and Eve were: rational animals. Rationality was not lost, nor was the freedom of the will that stems from the gift of reason.

Adam and Eve remain our first father and mother with regard to human nature, but by failing to recognize God as their head, Adam and Eve lost their own headship over the human race with regard to the supernatural and preternatural endowment that God had wished to give us. They retain that headship only with regard to the transmission

of human nature. Thus Eve is said to be the “mother of all the living” not in terms of grace (which is proper to Mary, the new Eve), but only in terms of nature. The failure of a kingly responsibility has engendered the loss of a kingdom of original justice, and the appearance of the kingdom of the “ruler of this world” (see Jn 14:30).

The Biblical witness to the reality of original sin is principally given in Genesis 3. It is briefly alluded to in Psalm 51:5: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” A more explicit source on original sin is the much later text of Sirach 25:24: “From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die.” Another text from the wisdom literature is Wisdom 2:23–24: “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it.” Clearly the doctrine of original sin, like that of the resurrection, underwent a development within Judaism, becoming more explicit in the centuries immediately preceding Jesus (and continuing to evolve in rabbinical Judaism).

In the New Testament, Jesus seems to briefly allude to original sin in his dialogue with the Pharisees on marriage, when He says in Matthew 19:8 that “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” This implies that a change involving hardness of heart has come upon mankind after the beginning narrated in Genesis 2:24–25 in which marriage was initially instituted. Jesus’ removal of the possibility of divorce also signals that, with the gift of grace, He has come to bring a salvific remedy to that hardness of heart stemming from original sin.¹

The teaching on original sin is clarified in the New Testament above all by St. Paul, who contrasts the universal effects of Adam’s sin on his posterity with the universal effects of Christ’s Redemption on His posterity. In 1 Cor 15:21–22, St. Paul writes: “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” Even more explicit is Rom 5:12–19:

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned²... Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to

1 See A. M. Dubarle, *The Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin*, trans. E. M. Stewart (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 126.

2 This last part of this sentence can also receive another translation: “in whom all have sinned,” a reading given in the Vulgate.

come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

On the basis of these texts and of the living Tradition of the Church, this doctrine concerning original sin has been solemnly and infallibly taught by the Council of Trent:³

1. If anyone does not confess that the first man, Adam, when he transgressed the commandment of God in paradise, immediately lost the holiness and justice in which he had been constituted, and through the offense of that prevarication incurred the wrath and indignation of God, and thus death with which God had previously threatened him, and, together with death, captivity under his power who thenceforth had the empire of death, that is to say, the devil, and that the entire Adam through that offense of prevarication was changed in body and soul for the worse, let him be anathema.

2. If anyone asserts that the transgression of Adam injured him alone and not his posterity, and that the holiness and justice which he received from God, which he lost, he lost for himself alone and not for us also; or that he, being defiled by the sin of disobedience, has transfused only death and the pains of the body into the whole human race, but not sin also, which is the death of the soul, let him be anathema, since he contradicts the Apostle who says: 'By one man sin entered into the world and by sin death; and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned' (Rm 5:12).

Errors Concerning Grace and Original Sin

In the history of the heresies in the life of the Church, we very frequently find opposite heresies attacking a single dogma. The opposing heresies err on opposite sides, generally, by either by defect or excess, that is, either by minimizing or exaggerating (absolutizing) a particular aspect. Catholic doctrine is like a mountain peak from which one can fall in two opposite directions. A perfect example of this is given with regard to the dogma of original sin.

The first error chronologically was an error of minimizing original sin, as occurred with Pelagius at the start of the fifth century. This tendency has been massively revived in modern times due to the influence of naturalism. We also find it in the Jewish world. The second error occurred at the Reformation, when Luther and Calvin exaggerated

the effects of original sin, turning it into a doctrine of the complete corruption of human nature, total depravity.

1. The Error of Pelagius and His Followers

The heresy of Pelagius concerning grace, which we will examine in a later talk, also implied a heretical view of original sin and its transmission. The denial of the necessity of grace for salvific acts implies a corresponding denial of the loss of our supernatural life (sanctifying grace and the theological virtues) through original sin. At root, the fundamental error of Pelagius was the failure to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural orders. He thus failed to grasp the supernatural grandeur of Christianity, which essentially lies in the supernatural elevation of man through the Incarnation of Christ.

The essence of the Pelagian system was summed up in the first charges against the Pelagians in 411:

1. Even if Adam had not sinned, he would have died.
2. Adam's sin harmed only himself, not the human race.
3. Children just born are in the same state as Adam before his fall.
4. The whole human race neither dies through Adam's sin or death, nor rises again through the resurrection of Christ.
5. The [Mosaic] Law is as good a guide to heaven as the Gospel.
6. Even before the advent of Christ there were men who were without sin.⁴

If Adam's sin harmed only himself, then how is original sin transmitted? Pelagius held that original sin is transmitted by *imitation*—through scandal—rather than by human procreation. Since infants are not yet capable of sinning by imitation, Pelagius logically denied the need for infant baptism. The errors of Pelagius were condemned in the Council of Carthage, approved by Pope Zosimus:

Can. 1. All the bishops established in the sacred synod of the Carthaginian Church have decided that whoever says that Adam, the first man, was made mortal, so that, whether he sinned or whether he did not sin, he would die in body, that is he would go out of the body not because of the merit of sin but by reason of the necessity of nature, let him be anathema.

Can. 2. Likewise it has been decided that whoever says that infants fresh from their mothers' wombs ought not to be baptized, or says that they are indeed baptized unto the remission of sins, but that they draw nothing of the original sin from Adam, which is expiated in the bath of regeneration, whence it follows that in regard to them the form of baptism

³ Session V, 1546, Denz. 788-89, DS 1511-12.

⁴ From the deacon Paulinus of Milan who made this accusation to his bishop Aurelian. See Catholic Encyclopedia (1917 ed.), "Pelagius and Pelagianism", available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11604a.htm>. See also St. Augustine, *The Deeds of Pelagius* 11.23.

“unto the remission of sins” is understood as not true, but as false, let him be anathema. Since what the Apostle says: “Through one man sin entered into the world (and through sin death), and so passed into all men, in whom all have sinned” [cf. Rom. 5:12], must not to be understood otherwise than as the Catholic Church spread everywhere has always understood it. For on account of this rule of faith even infants, who in themselves thus far have not been able to commit any sin, are therefore truly baptized unto the remission of sins, so that that which they have contracted from generation may be cleansed in them by regeneration.⁵

The condemnation of the Pelagian heresy was repeated again in the Council of Trent:

3. If anyone asserts that this sin of Adam, which in its origin is one, and by propagation, not by imitation, transfused into all, which is in each one as something that is his own, is taken away either by the forces of human nature or by a remedy other than the merit of the one mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us to God in his own blood, made unto us justice, sanctification and redemption; or if he denies that that merit of Jesus Christ is applied both to adults and to infants by the sacrament of baptism rightly administered in the form of the Church, let him be anathema. “For there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved” [Acts 4:12]. Whence that declaration: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sins of the world” [Jn 1:29]; and that other: ‘As many of you as have been baptized, have put on Christ’ [Gal 3:27].

4. If anyone denies that infants, newly born from their mothers’ wombs, are to be baptized, even though they be born of baptized parents, or says that they are indeed baptized for the remission of sins, but that they derive nothing of original sin from Adam which must be expiated by the laver of regeneration for the attainment of eternal life, whence it follows that in them the form of baptism for the remission of sins is to be understood not as true but as false, let him be anathema, for what the Apostle has said, by one man sin entered into the world, and by sin death, and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned [Rm 5:12], is not to be understood otherwise than as the Catholic Church has everywhere and always understood it. For in virtue of this rule of faith handed down from the apostles, even infants who could not as yet commit any sin of themselves, are for this reason truly baptized for the remission of sins, in order that in them what they contracted by generation may be washed away by regeneration. “For, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven” [Jn 3:5].⁶

2. Protestant Errors on Original Sin

Let us now look at the error exaggerating the effects of original sin. Luther made two principal errors with regard to original sin. First of all, he claimed that the penalty of original sin entailed the complete corruption of human nature, including the loss of free will. This error is the

logical cause of the other Lutheran errors which we shall look at in later talks concerning our inability to cooperate with grace, our inability to perform meritorious acts, and double predestination. This fundamental error regarding original sin manifests a failure to distinguish the natural and the supernatural orders. Instead of seeing the penalty for original sin to be the deprivation of supernatural and preternatural gifts which are above our nature, Luther understood it to consist in the corruption of the natural order itself.⁷ For example, Luther wrote:

The scholastic statement that “the natural powers are unimpaired” is a horrible blasphemy, though it is even more horrible when they say the same about demons. If the natural powers are unimpaired, what need is there of Christ? If by nature man has good will; if he has true understanding to which, as they say, the will can naturally conform itself; what is it, then, that was lost in Paradise through sin and that had to be restored through the Son of God alone? Yet in our day, men who seem to be masters of theology defend the statement that the natural powers are unimpaired, that is, that the will is good. Even though through malice it occasionally wills and thinks something besides what is right and good, they attribute this to the malice of men, not to the will as it is in itself.

Luther failed to understand that what was lost was supernatural charity in the will, but nevertheless the will remains naturally capable of following reason, and sin is indeed to be attributed to the malice of men. In his mature commentary on the third chapter of Genesis, Luther expressed the same point as follows:

The scholastics argue that original righteousness was not a part of man’s nature but, like some adornment, was added to man as a gift, as when someone places a wreath on a pretty girl. The wreath is certainly not a part of the virgin’s nature; it is something apart from her nature. It came from outside and can be removed again without any injury to her nature. Therefore they maintain about man and about demons that although they have lost their original righteousness, their natural endowments have nevertheless remained pure, just as they were created in the beginning. But this idea must be shunned like poison, for it minimizes original sin.

Let us rather maintain that righteousness was not a gift which came from without, separate from man’s nature, but that it was truly part of his nature, so that it was Adam’s nature to love God, to believe God, to know God, etc. These things were just as natural for Adam as it is natural for the eyes to receive light. But because you may correctly say that nature has been damaged if you render an eye defective by inflicting a wound, so, after man has fallen from righteousness into sin, it is correct and truthful to say that our natural endowments are not perfect but are corrupted by sin. For just as it is the nature of the eye to see, so it was the nature of reason and will in Adam to know God, to trust God, and to fear God. Since it is a fact that this has now been lost, who

⁵ Denz 101–102.

⁶ Decree on Original Sin, Session 5 (June 17, 1546), canons 3-4, Denzinger 790-791.

⁷ Luther’s commentary on Psalm 51, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 12, *Selected Psalms I*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 308.

is so foolish as to say that our natural endowments are still perfect? And yet nothing was more common and received more general acceptance in the schools than this thesis. But how much more foolish it is to make this assertion about the demons, about whom Christ says that they did not stand in the truth (John 8:44) and whom we know to be the bitterest enemies of Christ and of the church!

Therefore the perfect natural endowments in man were the knowledge of God, faith, fear, etc. These Satan has corrupted through sin; just as leprosy poisons the flesh, so the will and reason have become depraved through sin, and man not only does not love God any longer but flees from Him, hates Him, and desires to be and live without Him.⁸

A second closely related error of Luther and his followers lay in identifying original sin with the presence of involuntary disordered movements of concupiscence in us. This was a consequence of the above-mentioned failure to distinguish nature and grace in original justice. If Adam in Eden did not need grace because it was simply a part of nature, then principal consequence is logically not said to be the loss of grace (which was not necessary in Eden), but simply concupiscence, which is said to affect all of man's faculties. Calvin held a similar position, as we can see from the *Institutes*:

Original sin, then, may be defined a hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature, extending to all the parts of the soul, which first makes us obnoxious to the wrath of God, and then produces in us works which in Scripture are termed works of the flesh. . . . Hence, those who have defined original sin as the want of the original righteousness which we ought to have had, though they substantially comprehend the whole case, do not significantly enough express its power and energy. For our nature is not only utterly devoid of goodness, but so prolific in all kinds of evil, that it can never be idle. Those who term it concupiscence use a word not very inappropriate, provided it were added . . . that everything which is in man, from the intellect to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, is defiled and pervaded with this concupiscence; or, to express it more briefly, that *the whole man is in himself nothing else than concupiscence*.⁹

The Catholic Church, on the contrary, holds that the presence of these disordered movements of concupiscence, insofar as they are involuntary, is not directly sinful, and certainly does not constitute the essence of original sin. Rather concupiscence is a consequence of the loss of the preternatural gift of integrity. It is true that the disordered inclinations of our sense appetites (the passions of our concupiscible and irascible appetite) tempt us to sin, but they also provide an arena for spiritual combat and an occasion for merit.

The essence of original sin lies in the deprivation of sanctifying grace and the supernatural charity that flows from

⁸ *Luther's Works*, vol. 1, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 164-165. These lectures were given in 1535–1536.

⁹ Jean Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. 2, ch. 1, n. 8, p. 152-53 (my italics).

it, which alone make us supernaturally pleasing to God, friends of God, and participants in the divine nature and the divine life. As a result of original sin, children are born into this world deprived of the divine supernatural life, to which we were originally called. At Baptism, sanctifying grace is received together with the theological virtues, all the other infused moral virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Thus Baptism remits original sin. Nevertheless, the preternatural gifts are not returned to us by Baptism. Their deprivation is permitted by God as a sign of the original sin and an arena for merit.

Wounds Caused by Sin

Luther and Calvin are certainly not wrong, however, in insisting that human nature is wounded by original sin. This is an element of the Church's Tradition. However, it needs to be rightly understood. We are wounded by original sin through the loss of the supernatural and preternatural gifts.

Every sin wounds human nature in its natural inclination towards the moral good, thereby increasing the difficulty of subsequent good moral action. The wounds inflicted by sin, both original and personal, are summarized in four aspects: ignorance, malice, weakness, and concupiscence. These four aspects are connected with the four principal faculties in which we need virtue: intellect, will, and the two sense appetites (irascible and concupiscible).

Every sin has the effect of clouding the practical intellect and the deliberation and judgment of prudence, thus leading to a certain culpable ignorance. Every sin hardens the will against the attraction of charity, thus leading to a certain kind of malice. Every sin weakens our good resolutions and thus undermines the fortitude and perseverance of the irascible appetite. Every sin, finally, also gives new force to the disordered desires of the concupiscible appetite.

Every personal sin causes these four effects primarily in the person who sinned (although there is also a strong social effect of sin). Original sin caused these effects not just in the soul of Adam, however, but also in the human nature passed on by generation from him. Hence the Catholic tradition speaks of four wounds inflicted on human nature by original sin.

Through the loss of sanctifying grace and supernatural charity, the human will of fallen man does not of itself love God above all things as Father, nor do we naturally have a supernatural love for our neighbor. This absence of grace and charity can be understood as a wound in our will, compared with the way Adam and Eve were originally constituted in Eden. However, this does not imply that we now naturally "flee from God, hate Him, and desire to be and live without Him," as Luther states.

The other faculties of man are wounded by the loss of the preternatural gifts. Through the loss of infused knowl-

edge, we are born in complete ignorance. This ignorance can be referred to as a wound in the intellect. Through the loss of integrity, our concupiscible and irascible appetites experience passions that are often contrary to reason, and which can lead to sin if we consent to them. Thus we say that man's concupiscible appetite is wounded by concupiscence which so often leads us to lack moderation in our appetites. Similarly, our irascible appetite is wounded by lacking the firmness with which it was originally endowed in the pursuit of difficult goods.¹⁰

It is important, however, to remember that the four wounds inflicted by original sin do not intrinsically damage or corrupt human nature in itself. The four wounds result simply from the loss of the preternatural and supernatural gifts which were all given gratuitously by God above the exigencies of human nature. The wounds inflicted on human nature by original sin involve a stripping of all the added gifts that embellished human nature in its original state, raising it above its natural level. Through original sin, man is born with just human nature, destitute of the transcendent gifts that ordered it more perfectly towards the true and the good.

Patristic Interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan

The doctrine of the four wounds caused in human nature by original sin was illustrated by an allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan given by various Fathers of the Church. Origen gives this interpretation, and he states that it is not original with him, but was passed down by the "elders":

One of the elders wanted to interpret the parable as follows. The man who was going down is Adam. Jerusalem is

¹⁰ See St. Thomas, *ST I-II*, q. 85, a. 3: "As a result of original justice, the reason had perfect hold over the lower parts of the soul, while reason itself was perfected by God, and was subject to Him. Now this same original justice was forfeited through the sin of our first parent, as already stated (q. 81, a. 2); so that all the powers of the soul are left, as it were, destitute of their proper order, whereby they are naturally directed to virtue; which destitution is called a wounding of nature.

"Again, there are four of the soul's powers that can be subject of virtue, as stated above (q. 61, a. 2), the reason, where prudence resides, the will, where justice is, the irascible, the subject of fortitude, and the concupiscible, the subject of temperance. Therefore insofar as the reason is deprived of its order to the true, there is the wound of ignorance; insofar as the will is deprived of its order of good, there is the wound of malice; insofar as the irascible is deprived of its order to the arduous, there is the wound of weakness; and insofar as the concupiscible is deprived of its order to the delectable, moderated by reason, there is the wound of concupiscence.

"Accordingly these are the four wounds inflicted on the whole of human nature as a result of our first parent's sin. But since the inclination to the good of virtue is diminished in each individual on account of actual sin, as was explained above (q. 85, aa. 1-2), these four wounds are also the result of other sins, insofar as, through sin, the reason is obscured, especially in practical matters, the will hardened to evil, good actions become more difficult and concupiscence more impetuous."

paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers. The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord's body, and stable, which accepts all who wish to enter, is the Church. . . . The manager of the stable is the head of the Church, to whom its care has been entrusted. And the fact that the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior's second coming. All of this has been said reasonably and beautifully.¹¹

In accordance with this allegorical interpretation, the wounds inflicted by the robbers are connected with the loss of the supernatural and preternatural gifts. St. Ambrose writes: "They stripped us of the garments which we have received of spiritual grace, and so are wont to inflict wounds."¹²

The Teaching of the Council of Trent

The Lutheran errors concerning concupiscence as a consequence of original sin were countered by the Decree on Original Sin of the Council of Trent, canon 5:

5. If anyone denies that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which is conferred in baptism, the guilt of original sin is remitted, or says that the whole of that which belongs to the essence of sin is not taken away, but says that it is only canceled or *not imputed*, let him be anathema. For in those who are born again God hates nothing, because "there is no condemnation to those who are truly buried together with Christ by baptism unto death" [Rom 6:4], who "walk not according to the flesh" [Rm 8:1], but, putting off the "old man" and putting on the "new one who is created according to God" [Eph. 4:22 ff.; Col. 3:9 ff.], are made innocent, immaculate, pure, guiltless and beloved of God, "heirs indeed of God, joint heirs with Christ" [Rom 8:17], so that there is nothing whatever to hinder their entrance into heaven. But this holy council perceives and confesses that in the one baptized there remains concupiscence or an inclination to sin, which, since it is *left for us to wrestle with, cannot injure those who do not acquiesce but resist manfully* by the grace of Jesus Christ; indeed, "he who shall have striven lawfully shall be crowned" [2 Tim 2:5].

This concupiscence, which the Apostle sometimes calls sin [Rom. 6:12 ff.], the holy council declares the Catholic Church has never understood to be called sin in the sense that it is truly and properly sin in those born again, but in the sense that it is *of sin and inclines to sin*. If anyone is of the contrary opinion, let him be anathema.¹³

3. De-mythologizing Genesis

The view of Pelagius who held that the original sin did not change man's condition has become widely embraced in modern times by those who propose to demythologize

¹¹ Homily 34 on Luke 10:25-37, in *Origen: Homilies on Luke; Fragments on Luke*, trans. Joseph Lienhard (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 138.

¹² Quoted in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* on Luke 10:30. Trans. John Henry Newman, *Catena Aurea*, vol. 3, part 1 (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 374.

¹³ Denzinger 792 (my italics).

the Bible in one way or another. This was done first by liberal Protestant theologians in the nineteenth century, but has also been adopted in mitigated form by Catholic theologians in the past century. The view is propounded that Genesis is simply a collection of myths that have no historical basis and which simply seek to explain our existential situation through a myth of origins. Let me give you an example. A recent work of Catholic theology asserts:

In light of what scientists can tell us about human origins, modern Catholic biblical scholars recognize that the origin stories in Genesis 1–11 are not meant to be understood as historical fact. Therefore, we need not take as literal truth that human beings began their existence in a paradise, and were endowed with beyond human capabilities of knowledge and bodily control, and were without suffering and death. And, most important of all, one need not conclude that there was an offense committed by the first human beings so horrible that the justice of God demanded that henceforth they and their descendants be punished with suffering and death, and declared guilty of eternal damnation.¹⁴

That sounds rather similar to what Pelagius was proposing fifteen centuries ago. What should we say about this?

There is no doubt that the first chapters of Genesis do not present us with history in the normal sense of the word. This should not be surprising since we are dealing with a period far earlier than any written records. However, it is one thing to say that Genesis presents the history of man's origins in an archaic and symbolic account, making use of metaphors. It would be another thing to assert that Genesis does not present history at all, but merely myths. The Magisterium of the Church has taken up this question in the encyclical *Humani generis* of Pius XII published in 1950, in which he asserts that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are to be understood as true history, but expressed in a very archaic and symbolic form:

In a particular way must be deplored a certain too free interpretation of the historical books of the Old Testament. Those who favor this system, in order to defend their cause, wrongly refer to the Letter which was sent not long ago to the Archbishop of Paris by the Pontifical Commission on Biblical Studies. This letter, in fact, clearly points out that the *first eleven chapters of Genesis*, although properly speaking not conforming to the historical method used by the best Greek and Latin writers or by competent authors of our time, *do nevertheless pertain to history in a true sense*, which however must be further studied and determined by exegetes; the same chapters, (the Letter points out), in simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a people but little cultured, both state the principal truths which are fundamental for our salvation, and also give a popular description of the origin of the human race and the chosen people. If, however, the ancient sacred writers have taken anything from popular narrations (and this may be conceded), it must never be forgotten that they did so with the help of divine inspiration,

¹⁴ *Evolution and Eden: Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 120-21.

through which they were rendered immune from any error in selecting and evaluating those documents.

39. Therefore, whatever of the popular narrations have been inserted into the Sacred Scriptures must in no way be considered on a par with myths or other such things, which are more the product of an extravagant imagination than of that striving for truth and simplicity which in the Sacred Books, also of the Old Testament, is so apparent that our ancient sacred writers must be admitted to be clearly superior to the ancient profane writers.

The archaic form of history present in the first chapters of Genesis can legitimately be referred to as “mythic” with regard to the *style* of the writing, but not to imply that the *events* narrated in Genesis 1–3 have no basis in history. John Paul II thus admitted a certain use of the word “myth” with regard to the first chapters of Genesis, but which respects their profound content of truth, expressed through an archaic language:

In this case, in fact, the term ‘myth’ does not refer to fictitious-fabulous content, but simply to an archaic way of expressing a deeper content. Without any difficulty, we discover that content under the stratum of the ancient narrative, truly marvelous in the quality and condensation of the truths contained there.

This question had already been addressed earlier by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in a document of 1909 which proposes the following doubt:

May it be taught that: the aforesaid three chapters of Genesis contain not accounts of actual events, accounts, that is, which correspond to objective reality and historical truth, but, either fables derived from the mythologies and cosmogonies of ancient peoples and accommodated by the sacred writer to monotheistic doctrine after the expurgation of any polytheistic error; or allegories and symbols without any foundation in objective reality proposed under the form of history to inculcate religious and philosophical truths; or finally legends in part historical and in part fictitious freely composed with a view to instruction and edification?

Answer: In the negative to both parts.

In other words, we cannot hold that Genesis 1–3 is simply a myth like the myths of other ancient peoples to explain human origins.

Modern Jewish Thought on Original Sin

Modern Jewish thought not infrequently distances itself from the doctrine of original sin, claiming that it little or nothing to do with Judaism and is essentially a doctrine first propounded by St. Paul. Often this position goes together with a view of the first chapters of Genesis as essentially mythical. One prominent example of this can be found in the very interesting book, *Where Judaism Differs: An Inquiry into the Distinctiveness of Judaism*, by Abba Hillel Silver. The author writes:

The idea that man needs to be ‘saved’ either from the toils of life or from some Original Sin or from the prison

house of matter or from baleful astrological influences is not part of Judaism.

Nor does it [Jewish theology] accept the doctrine of man's corrupt origin, "that all man descended from Adam contract original sin from him, and that this sin is transmitted by way of origin."

In the Haggadah of the Rabbis the scenes and characters of the Genesis paradise saga appear not infrequently. They provided the preachers of the day with rich homiletical material. . . . However, no doctrinal consequences were ever drawn from the Garden of Eden legend for Judaism as was the case for Christianity. . . . The Genesis myths were in no way decisive for the theology of Judaism. . . .

Man is never confronted with the fact of a total and irrevocable depravity demanding total regeneration—rebirth into a new man. Men do fall into sin, but Man, the race, has not fallen.¹⁵

What should we say about this? There is no doubt, mentioned above, that the doctrine of original sin underwent a development within Judaism, and that the modern period has seen a retreat on this point, as many Jewish scholars adopt a demythologizing tendency.

Secondly, if one examines the issue more closely, it can be seen that what is denied by Jewish theologians is above all the Protestant conception of a complete corruption of human nature as a result of the Fall. This is rightly repudiated as contrary to the freedom of man's clearly taught by the Torah and by the Jewish oral tradition.¹⁶

Third, the necessity of grace and its loss through original sin is not clearly understood by the Jewish tradition because this is a mystery fully revealed only through Christ and in Christ.

Why Did God Permit Original Sin?

The doctrine on original sin naturally leads to the question as to why God permitted the fall of Adam and Eve, which has been the cause of so much tragedy, sin, and suffering in the course of human history. This question is a particularly powerful form of the general question as to why God permits evil. The general answer is that God only permits evil because He is so powerful that He can draw from it a greater good. God can never will evil directly in itself (for in itself, evil has nothing desirable about it), but He can will to *permit* evils—both natural and moral—*so as*

15 Abba Hillel Silver, *Where Judaism Differs: An Inquiry into the Distinctiveness of Judaism* (New York: Collier Books, 1989), 158, 165–68.

16 See, for example, Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 161: "Judaism does not contain any myth of sin which is a myth of fate, for its prophets destroyed the rudiments of such a myth. Judaism knows nothing of original sin, that event in which man as mere object suffers its effects." Baeck is repudiating the idea that man lost freedom of the will and personal responsibility as a consequence of the Fall. Thus what he is repudiating seems to be the idea of total depravity.

to draw from them a greater good.¹⁷ If the presence of evil in the world were not ordered to the realization of some greater good, then it would truly be an argument against the existence of God, and it would be inexplicable.

With regard to the specific question of the permission of original sin, the greater good that resulted from this immense tragedy is the Redemption of man worked by Jesus Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 412 addresses this question:

But why did God not prevent the first man from sinning? St. Leo the Great responds, "Christ's inexpressible grace gave us blessings better than those the demon's envy had taken away."¹⁸ And St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "There is nothing to prevent human nature's being raised up to something greater, even after sin; God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good. Thus 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!'"¹⁹

As St. Thomas mentions, the Church has answered this most serious question in the incomparably joyful hymn sung by the deacon in the Easter Vigil of the Latin rite, called the "*Exsultet*" or the "*Praeconium paschale*":

*This is the night,
when Christians ev'rywhere,
washed clean of sin and freed from all defilement,
are restored to grace and grow together in holiness.*

*This is the night,
when Jesus broke the chains of death
and rose triumphant from the grave.
What good would life have been to us,
had Christ not come as our Redeemer?
Father, how wonderful your care for us!
How boundless your merciful love!
To ransom a slave you gave away your Son.
O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam,
which gained for us so great a Redeemer!*

*Most blessed of all nights,
chosen by God to see Christ rising from the dead!*

*Of this night scripture says:
"The night will be as clear as day:
it will become my light, my joy."*

*The power of this holy night dispels all evil,
washes guilt away, restores lost innocence,
brings mourners joy;*

*it casts out hatred, brings us peace,
and humbles earthly pride.*

17 See *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1: "As Augustine says, 'Since God is supremely good, he would not permit any evil at all in his works, unless he were sufficiently almighty and good to bring good even from evil.' It is therefore a mark of the limitless goodness of God that He permits evils to exist, and draws from them good."

18 St. Leo the Great, Sermon 73.4, in PL 54:396.

19 *ST III*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3.

*Night truly blessed,
when heaven is wedded to earth
and we are reconciled to God!*

God permitted original sin, foreknowing all the tragedy that it was to introduce into the world, in order to bless the world with a remedy for that tragedy which would be good beyond all comprehension: the Incarnation of Christ, as the divine Victim for the sins of the world, the Redeemer of His fallen creature.

The purpose of creation is the manifestation of God's goodness outside of Himself. Creation manifests God's goodness on every level, and especially in the rational creature. However, Christ's redemption of man through His sorrowful Passion manifests God's love and mercy in a way that far exceeds, infinitely exceeds, the love shown by creation itself. Likewise, the Passion of Christ is capable of awakening in the souls of those whom He has redeemed a love of gratitude and praise far exceeding that awakened by any other work of God, including the blessedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.