

Original Sin

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned... For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. ~ Romans 5:12, 19

The Fall

MAN AND WOMAN were created in a state of natural friendship with God. They were at one not only with God but also in themselves, with one another as well, and with the entire created world. They were also free — free of the tendency to sin and free to choose the good. They had complete self-mastery. As the story of Genesis narrates, God put this freedom to the test when he allowed the devil in the form of a serpent to tempt them — with lies and half-truths that they believed. In their pride and lack of trust that God had their best interests at heart, through the misuse of their freedom, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command.

Consequences of the Fall

By disobeying God, our first parents destroyed the original state of friendship in which they had been created. They were cut off from the presence of God, driven out of the Garden of Eden, and barred from returning (see Gn 3:23-24). They changed physically and spiritually. The original harmony they had enjoyed with creation was destroyed, and the original unity between them was now subject to tension and futility, "marked," as the *Catechism* explains, "by lust and domination"¹ (CCC 400). This lost friendship was a death of the spiritual life of the soul, and brought with it physical death: "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gn 3:19).

When Adam and Eve lost their state of original justice and holiness, they lost this natural state for their descendants as well. From this moment forward, sin and death inundated the whole of creation, as Sacred Scripture tells us: "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" (Wis 2:23-24). The fallen human nature is a state of being deprived of the original justice and holiness that our first par-



The Expulsion from the Garden, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

ents enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. Human nature is now wounded by sin, warring with itself. St. Paul writes with acute self-knowledge of this miserable state of affairs: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:15, 17-19).

Original sin affects everyone; it is the state into which we are all born. Every individual is born without God's life. This does not mean we are

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¹ Cf. Genesis 3: 7-16

guilty of personal sin, but that we are born with a wounded, although not wholly corrupted, human nature.

Our wounded human nature is characterized by a darkened intellect (we no longer understand or reason perfectly), a weakened will (we have difficulty resisting temptations to sin), and disordered desires that incline us toward sin rather than toward God. The human mind has been made for truth, but because of sin it is not always able to see the truth. Likewise, the human will has been made for goodness, but because of sin it is pulled toward doing evil. Our bodily desires, in themselves good, because of sin are often not properly ordered toward our true good. This inclination to evil is traditionally called "concupiscence" (From a Latin word meaning "to long for or desire"). Christian Tradition has given this word its particularly negative meaning of "those desires and longings of the body which are contrary to the good perceived in the mind." Human weaknesses are not sinful in themselves, but without God's grace we are prone to sin. In sum, human existence wounded by sin can be deeply frustrating, as St. Paul makes abundantly clear (see also below).

God Rescues and Saves Us

From this fallen state, we need a rescuer and redeemer. Without God's life, the soul is spiritually dead and, alone, we cannot always separate truth from falsehood and are too weak to withstand our inclination to evil and our disordered desires. Even as God was meting out just punishment to Adam and Eve, he promised them a savior (see Gn 3:15). God has willed that the obedience and righteousness of his only-begotten Son made man, Jesus Christ the new Adam, undo the first Adam's sin and be the source of our justification and sanctification. It is only through Christ's redemptive actions that we can receive the grace to heal the wounds that incline us to sin.

The sacrament of Baptism restores life to the soul by wiping away original sin. This is why the Church baptizes infants who, although not guilty of personal sin, still need the cleansing effects of Baptism. However, Baptism does not take away this disordered inclination toward sin. Why would God allow our human nature to remain wounded? He could have taken away the consequences of the sin of our first parents, and of the sins of us their descendants. But if he had done this, he would have robbed us of our human dignity and freedom. Choice without



The Murder of Abel by Cain, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

consequences is just as if our actions have no importance to God, and choice with no importance is meaningless freedom, since nothing real results. If we are to freely love God, we must be free to turn from him as well; the choice for good and for evil both must have meaning.

With the help of God's grace, each individual can overcome sin and live as a child of God (see Gal 4:5-7), as one who is a fellow heir with Christ (see Rom 8:17). This does not occur without struggle, and Scripture characterizes this struggle as a war against the flesh: "For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:22-25). This struggle enables us to value salvation and makes us surrender more completely to Christ, who alone has the power to deliver us.

(CCC 374-377, 379, 388-390, 396-409, 1263-1264, 1426, 2514-2516)

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The Mystery of Evil

And he did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord. ~ 2 Chronicles 12:14

EVIL IS ALL AROUND US. Greed, lust for power or pleasure, and pride result in cheating, stealing, despoiling of others' goods and persons, arguments, broken marriages, fighting, and war. Selfishness results in the willful murder of helpless babes in their mothers' wombs. Hate abounds and results in murder, terrorism, and "ethnic cleansing." We see all around us entire nations locked in endless cycles of hatred, violence, and revenge. Evils of other kinds are with us as well. Storms, floods, drought, famine, pestilence, illness, accidents, bereavement, separation, and anxiety bring grief and sorrow to all of us.

We ask, "Why does evil exist?" We see God seemingly powerless in the face of evil and suffering. We may decide that God cannot be good if he allows the terrible evils of the world to exist, especially those that afflict innocents. Or we reject altogether belief in

God because evil is so rampant. Instead of hating evil, some choose to hate God, embracing alienation and despair.

Yet evil did not exist in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God. God did not create evil; it exists because we choose to make it exist. God never intended to create an automated human being, a kind of robot. He created us to seek happiness — here and hereafter — by choosing the good. In his wisdom and goodness, he gave us freedom, freedom to choose, with a set of choices put before us by an intellect that we ourselves can govern. *Evil came into the world because our first parents chose it.* God did not prevent this dreadful calamity because he respected the very nature of humankind as he had created us: free to choose to love or reject God him-

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self. And evil remains with us because we still choose it. Even many "natural" calamities are the consequence of evil, although we do not recognize why we experience them: *"If a man does evil, it will roll back upon him, and he will not know where it came from"* (Sir 27:27).

During his life on earth, Jesus knew evil. He saw it all around him, and it caused him to shed tears and to act with abundant compassion. He wept over the fate that would befall Jerusalem (see Lk 19:41-44) and over the death of his friend Lazarus, whom he compassionately raised

from the dead (see Jn 11:17-44). He healed the lame, the blind, the dumb, the possessed, the leper, the sinner — the wounds of all who sought his help in faith (see, for example, Mt 8:2-3; Mt 9:32-33; Mk 3:10; Mk 7:32-35; Lk 7:2-10; Lk 7:37-48; Jn 4:46-53; Jn 9:1-7).

If he wished, God could eliminate all evil. He would accomplish this, however, only by removing free will from us. Without free will, though, we would no longer be truly human. We would no longer be kind or generous or thoughtful. We would no longer love, for love requires freedom. Due to our fallen nature and tendency to sin, evil will exist until the end of time, as Jesus tells us: *"The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No; lest in*



Martyrdom of St. Menas, 6th century ivory carving from Alexandria, Egypt

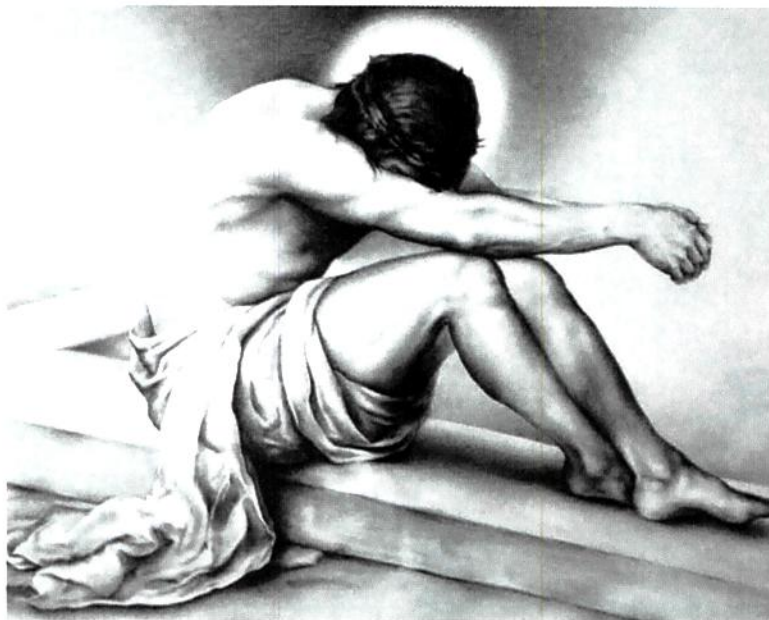
gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' ... Then [Jesus] left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the Kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will

gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father'" (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43).

God does not allow evil in the world without intending to bring greater good from it. How he accomplishes this shall be known fully only when we are with him in eternity. When our first parents succumbed to the temptation of the fallen angel Satan, God did not abandon us whom he loved. Despite Adam and Eve's choice of evil, God worked a miracle of love by giving us something even better than what they had thrown away: his Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we received redemption, a return to divine friendship, and Heaven, an eternal garden of paradise. In his overflowing benevolence and goodness, God himself gives us an example of how we are to respond to evil: "See that none of you repays evil

for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all" (1 Thes 5:15).

Jesus showed his power over evil when he endured, of his own free will, the sufferings of his Passion and crucifixion. The whole of Jesus' life is a demonstration of God's willingness to share our sorrows and sufferings, and to give us the hope and the



Prayer before Crucifixion, by Elizabeth Stefanick

way to bear the tribulations brought down on us by ourselves and others, renewed day in and day out by acts that reject the will of God. Jesus did not come to destroy suffering, but to sanctify it (see CCC 1521). The Father allowed these things to happen to his Son, even though he is all-powerful, has control of all things, and could have used

his power to save Jesus. St. Paul speaks of this mystery when he says, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:25).

Instead of using our daily difficulties to turn away from God, we need to turn our attention and hearts toward God and to concentrate, instead, on faith. Only our Christian faith — taken as a totality, as a whole — can respond to the mystery of evil: "There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil" (CCC 309; italics in original). Only faith can explain the unfathomable ways of God's almighty power. "Nothing is more apt to confirm our faith and hope than holding it fixed in our minds that nothing is impossible with God. Once our reason has grasped the idea of God's almighty power, it will easily and without any hesitation admit everything ... [that the Church will] propose for us to believe"¹ (CCC 274). In confronting the mystery of evil —

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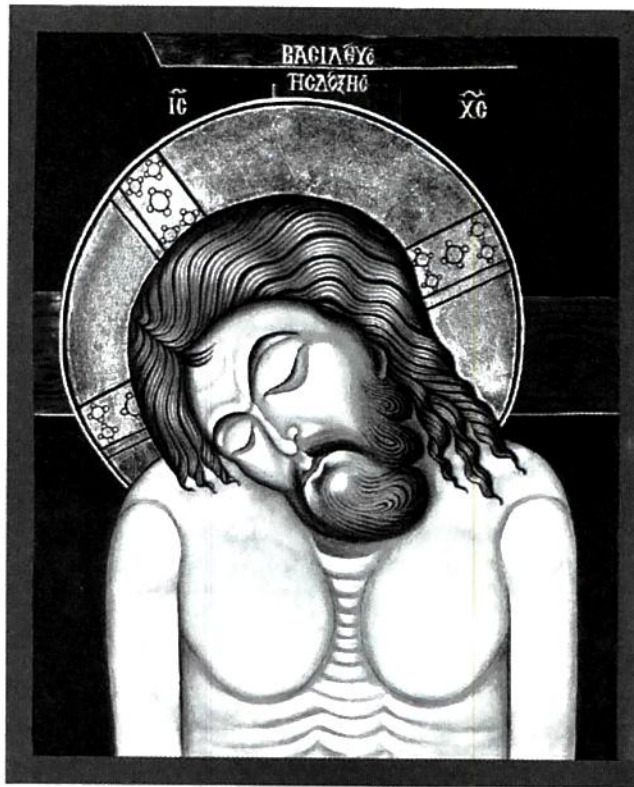
¹ Roman Catechism, 1, 2, 15

and it is a mystery beyond our full comprehension even if not beyond our experience — faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ, is indispensable. In contemplating the mystery of evil, as with all mysteries, faith makes no explanation necessary, while lack of faith makes no explanation possible.

Evidence of God's care and love throughout all time abounds. We can dwell on the story of creation, of all that came from nothing, and on the splendors of the Garden of Eden and the gifted creatures who possessed it. We can reflect on all the covenants God made with his people despite their hardheartedness and unfaithfulness. We can meditate on the promise of a Savior

and the realization of the promise in the Incarnation, when God's own Son came to earth, knowing what would be done to him to bring the good of salvation out of so much evil. We can rejoice at all God continues to give: his Holy Spirit, making complete the outpouring of the three Persons of the Trinity for the express well-being of all humankind; the Church Jesus founded as his instrument to bring grace through the sacraments, and to bring all to the embrace of the Trinity in Heaven; and the many expressions of the divine in human lives — miracles, apparitions of the Blessed Mother, and, most of all, the saints that have been raised up among us as living examples of joy and freedom in a world drenched in evil.

We are still free to choose evil instead of good, to listen to the one who is "a murderer from the beginning ... a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44) rather than to respond to the Father's invitation: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Mt 17:5). We must continually use the gifts that God has given



Man of Sorrows, by Renata Grzan

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us: the intellect that seeks truth and the will that chooses good. With these gifts, aided by God's grace, we must work out our salvation. When we misuse our gifts of intellect and free will, and choose to do evil, we are solely responsible and must live with the consequences. The more we choose evil, the more we become trapped in the slavery of sin; we become creatures of vice. When we use our gifts to choose good, we embrace happiness and a sense of true freedom; we become creatures of virtue and holiness. The more we choose to do good, the more pleasing we become to God and, to at least a small degree, we help change the world back to the harmony that existed before the fall of our first parents, as St. Paul tells us: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). We can learn to offer our own suffering and disappointments to a God whose mercy is always available. All this will remain the same until the end of time, when Christ will come in glory to judge the world (see Mt 25:31-33). The final judgment will mark the end of evil forever.

Saints give us the example of ways to live to overcome evil: to have the right desire, which is God; to have the right will, which is choosing Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (see Jn 14:6); and to do the right actions, which is living in holiness, the conscious avoidance of sin and evil. Herein lies the Catholic's answer to the mystery of evil, which is Satan and sin. And herein lies, as well, real happiness, joy, and freedom, here on earth and into eternity.

(CCC 272-274, 309-314, 385-387, 401, 403, 407-409, 412, 671, 677, 844, 1521, 1607, 1707, 1732-1734, 1865, 2851-2854)