

Faith of Our Fathers

[A WEEKLY INSTRUCTION FOR YOUNG AND OLD.]

III. Mystery of Original Sin.

22. We could not, without revelation, know the fact of sin hidden in our nature; nor can we even, knowing it, clearly understand it.

That Adam, the chief of the human race, should have rendered all that race of which he was the originator and representative, guilty and miserable, is a mystery which our reason must accept on the word of God, but which cannot be explained. It cannot be rejected as impossible, nor can anything unjust or contrary to the divine perfections be found in it.

In order to elucidate this doctrine the following parable is sometimes used as an example: A man was raised by his king from the lowest grade of society to the highest rank and nobility. Immense riches and the greatest dignities were also conferred upon him; and, moreover, all these benefits were hereditary and were to be transmitted to his children. But he committed a crime; he was guilty of high treason against his benefactor, and rendered himself deserving of the most severe punishment. Degraded, despoiled of all his goods, and sold as a slave, he died, and left his children overwhelmed with disgrace, and inheritors of his misery and his slavery. The miserable inheritance of these children is a representation of original sin in the descendants of Adam.

The children of Adam, it may be urged, are not only unfortunate, but they are also guilty. How can they be guilty of a sin which they have never committed? From amongst many explanations given by theologians, which are more or less calculated to throw some light on this mystery, we select the following:*

The Council of Trent has defined that the sin of Adam is transmitted to his descendants by the propagation of life. In order to understand this definition a distinction must be observed between that which theologians call actual sin and habitual sin. Actual sin consists in the act by which man transgresses the commandments of God; habitual sin is the state of him who has violated the divine law. Man, in committing mortal sin, loses sanctifying grace, which is the life of the soul; and thus deprived of life his soul is in a state of death and of sin, which continues until he has recovered sanctifying grace.

So when the Church teaches that the sin of Adam is transmitted to us, she does not mean that the act by which Adam disobeyed God becomes the act of all men; the actual sin belongs to Adam alone, and is not communicated to his children. It is only the habitual sin, or the deprivation of original justice, which we inherit with our nature.

By reason of Adam's sin we are all born deprived of original justice; and this privation, so far as it is produced in us by Adam's fault, constitutes original sin, which is a real stain on the soul, and a sin in all the rigorous theological meaning of the word, though it is not a personal actual sin. Hence we are born guilty of a sin which personally we have not committed.

It may be urged, "Why did God make our fall dependent only on Adam, ordaining that sanctifying grace should be ours only on condition that Adam remained faithful to Him?" We reply that it was just that the happiness of the creature should depend on his fidelity to his Creator. Finally, if the question is pursued to the utmost, and a full explanation of God's actions insisted on, we must remember that human reason cannot account for them. They are a mystery, a divine secret, and, as we said in speaking of the Blessed Trinity, we must simply believe; and submitting our feeble understanding to the teaching of Faith, say, "My God, I believe the doctrine of original sin, because Thou hast revealed it, and Thy word is infallible; and in this Faith I will live and die."

Fourth Article: The Immaculate Conception.

23. Original sin, as we have shown, is contracted in our birth. The children of Adam, in the first moments of their existence, are like stars whose light is extinguished

*This explanation, like others of the same kind, is only a system of explanation, a theological opinion, and by no means a certain doctrine.

—they are enveloped in the darkness of sin. In uniting itself with the body, so as to constitute human nature, the soul becomes stained with sin, like a precious pearl that has fallen in the mire. Every descendant of guilty man by generation contracts original sin. All his posterity appears in the eye of God marked with a sign of the devil, like a cursed race, and, according to St. Augustine's expression, like a mass of damnation.

There is one admirable exception, one child of light amongst all the children of death, one lily amongst the thorns—the Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. She alone was born in grace; she alone was conceived without the stain of original sin. By an exceptional privilege, called the Immaculate Conception, she was preserved from the universal taint, through the merits of the Redeemer whose Mother she was destined to be.

24. God, who, in His impenetrable designs, had allowed the fall of man, deigned in His mercy to give him a Redeemer, who should deliver him from the slavery of the devil and reinstate him in all his primitive rights.

This Redeemer was promised on the very day of the sin. The Scripture says that God descended into Paradise to impose on man the penalty of death, with which He had threatened him in case of his disobedience. But there was one more guilty even than fallen man—it was the devil, hidden under the form of a serpent. God cursed him, and said, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed, and she shall crush thy head." This woman, who, by her seed—that is to say, by her Son—should crush the head and demolish the empire of the devil, was the Virgin Mary. The enmity, the war, between her and the serpent, who, far from overcoming her, is himself utterly vanquished and crushed by her heel, is her triumph over sin, her glorious Immaculate Conception. The same privilege is indicated in the words of God, who, by the mouth of Gabriel, addresses Mary with the title, "Full of Grace": words which would fall short of the truth if Mary had been deprived of grace during a single instant of her existence; if she, the true star of the morning, had not from the beginning shone with an ever pure and brilliant light.

In preserving the Blessed Virgin Mary from original sin, God, in His mercy, prepared the way for the redemption of man, for the coming of the Messiah.

Wanderer

I have come home again to meadow-land and orchard,
And the dear, cool fingers of home wind fast about my own,
While broken words of love are sounding at my shoulder
Saying—You were away, and everything was lone

The hills you knew, and meadow-land, and house were empty.

The cherries blossomed and the petals fell unseen,
The dark fruit rounded, ripened, and was gathered,
And oh, how empty was the place where you had been!

Sometimes the dogs would come, whining softly for you,
Asking for a romp across the windy fields once more,
Wondering what kept you so, worried and bewildered,
Waiting for your eager step, your whistle at the door

—Yes, I am home again, the chimney smoke is rising
Straight against the sunset, and lo, a window gleams;
But there's no voice at my shoulder, no clasp of dear cool fingers,

Only the quiet frost and the dim-eyed sorrow of dreams.

—BERNARD RAYMOND, in the *New Republic*.

Pain and despair and heartache cast you down for a while, but afterwards—they help you to understand.

AN APPEAL FROM THE BACKBLOCKS

At Tuatapere—a bush township in Southland—Mass is celebrated in the most westerly part of New Zealand. The few scattered Catholics are making a bold endeavor to raise funds for a much-needed church but realise their difficulties without assistance from outside. They therefore appeal to the generously disposed readers of the *Tablet* to help them in their enterprise.

Subscriptions may be sent to the undersigned—Presbytery, Riverton—and will be acknowledged in the *Tablet*.

(Rev.) D. P. BUCKLEY.

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