

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO ORIGINAL SIN?

In Modern Life

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man's remote ancestry and primitive history.

It designated as well a reality in the life of each individual, one debilitating the human person morally prior to any free choice for which he would later be responsible.

As in other cases where man and his relation to God are concerned, religious language had to use symbols. And this is the way in which a real evil caused by man and coextensive with his history came to be symbolized in terms of real causes at the dawn of the human experience.

Was the Adam spoken of in Genesis, by Saint Paul, and in Church documents one individual, a collective designation, or a symbol of Everyman? There is a divergence of opinion on this point among Catholic scholars today. But about one thing there is no doubt. The Christian doctrine of Original Sin was intended to instruct man in far more ways than whether the moral pollution of the atmosphere into which all are now born came originally from one set of original parents or more. But what can it say to men and women so obviously aware of evil in the world today?

The moral evil man encounters prior to his first free decision is not the work of God, who has rather offered humanity nothing less than friendship with Himself from the very beginning of religious history. That evil is rather the meaninglessness and absurdity that humanity itself injected into existence by rejecting the divine initiative with lasting consequences down through the ages.

This was certainly a valid approach at the time. But a great deal of data has been uncovered since we learned about

Original Sin in school, data about the Bible stories in Genesis, facts from archeology and paleontology, data regarding the interpretation both of Scripture and subsequent doctrinal definitions. All of this important data is involved in the development of the Church's grasp of the traditional doctrine of Original Sin and its presentation in catechesis.

Contemporary attempts to understand and enable others to understand the doctrine of Original Sin begin from day to day experience rather than from an abstract statement of a truth. If we but scan the morning newspaper or wearily watch the evening news telecast, we are painfully aware of the tragic suffering people everywhere undergo.

If we take a hard look at ourselves, if we examine our consciences, we find that all is not well there either. All of us must grapple with ourselves to be honest, faithful, generous. In spite of our best efforts we find that we do the very things we most wish not to do, and in doing them we often hurt others whom we love. We repent, renew our resolutions, try hard, succeed sometimes, but fail, too. There is something painfully wrong within us as well as outside us. We not only are touched by the evil in the human situation, but we even add our share to man's unhappiness.

And yet the divine generosity was not frustrated by human selfishness but continued until the odds of evil against man were reversed in the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death.

Where sin abounded, grace did not abound. Because of His cross and resurrection, the Christian believes the inevitable tears of human existence can even now be those of joy and hope for the day when all will be wiped away.

In Catechisms

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or punishments are such things as death, suffering, ignorance and a strong inclination toward sin.

Recognizing the depth of insight in the Biblical interpretation of the human situation and the further precisions added by Catholic theologians of other ages, the Church today is trying to translate these insights into more contemporary language and perspective. A great deal of mystery remains and always will, but the approach through experience makes possible a more direct, personal grasp of the reality of Original Sin in today's situation.

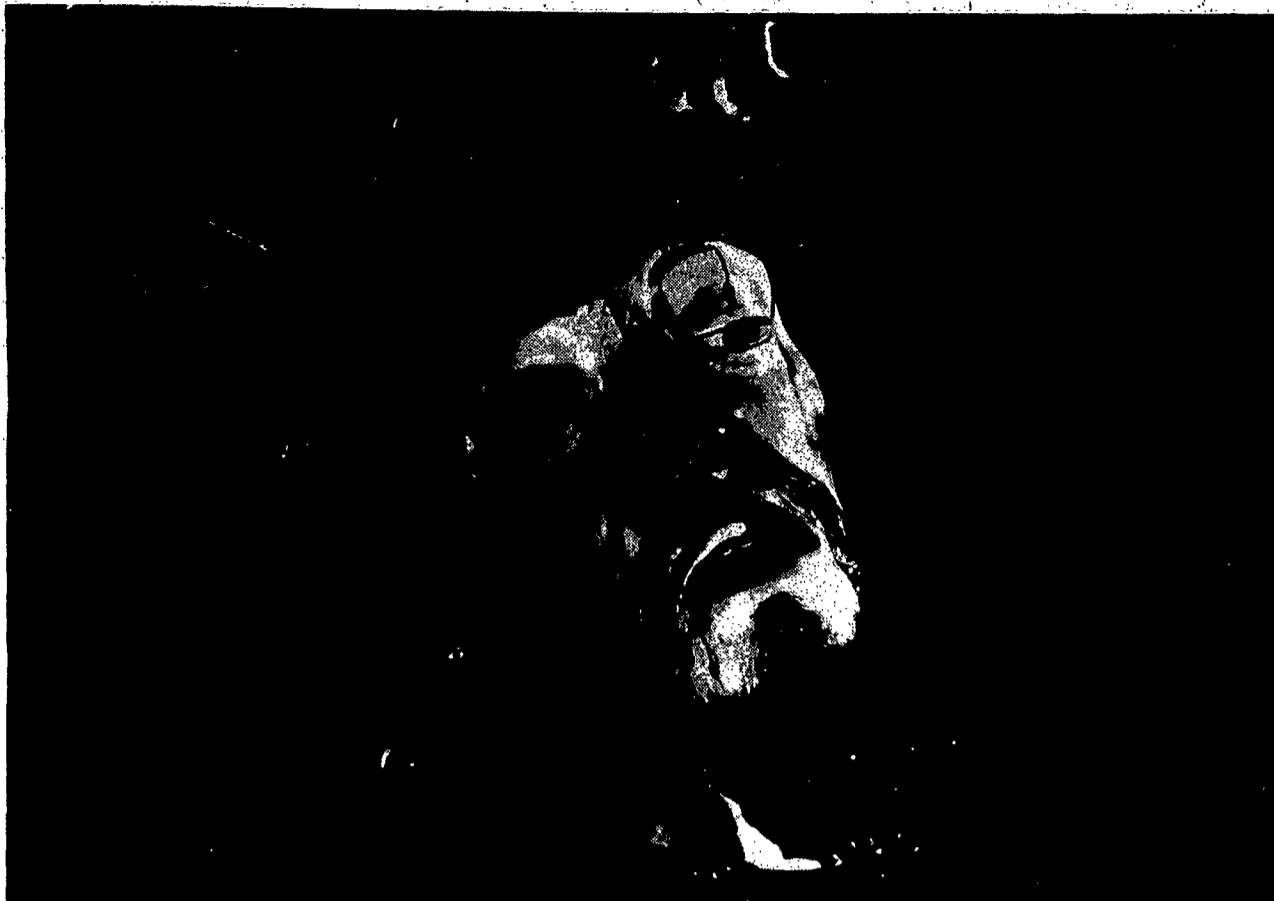
Instead of being preoccupied with how it all started, theologians and religious educators are more concerned with discerning what it means today and what is to be done about it. The exact historical beginnings are hidden in the misty unknown of prehistory, millions of years before the story of Adam and Eve was written.

The story of Adam and Eve is not a historical document but

the attempt of God's People in a given time and culture to explain the same mystery that we experience in our world and in our hearts still today. In the face of this mystery of evil we are stimulated to penetrate the human facade of self-righteousness and the myth of uninterrupted human progress. We are challenged to recognize our need, the need of the whole human race. We are all poor in this respect, all in need of help from a God who so believes in us and our world that He sent His only Son to save us.

For the believer the experience of evil does not lead to despair or disillusion; it opens one in an attitude of hope to the equally present mystery of God's faithful love. "Where sin was multiplied, grace immeasurably exceeded it, in order that, as sin established its reign by way of death, so God's grace might establish its reign in righteousness, and issue in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:21). With this hope we are encouraged to commit ourselves to do all we can to work with God to improve the quality of human life.

**KNOW
YOUR FAITH**



Christ's Statue in Peru

The symbolism of Christ's redemptive suffering is evident in this close-up study of a statue in Peru. (NC Photo by Robert Hirschfeld.)

Sex, the Jews, and Mistakes In Doctrinal Development

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT, SJ.

From the earliest Christian times right up to our own day there have always been some bishops, priests and laymen who quoted passages of Scripture to prove something that was not intended by the sacred writer. As a result, there has always been a certain group of people in the Church following what they think is sound doctrinal development but it is really a mistaken view. Furthermore, they have done themselves and others a great deal of harm by persisting in this mistaken view.

One of these ideas is that sex is at best a shady thing and God permits sexual activity and pleasure only for propagation of children. Apparently some have even tried to hold that the pleasurable part in that permitted activity should be avoided, or at least one should regret it. One of the scriptural passages quoted throughout the centuries by the partisans of this view is found in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, 4:4, "Each of you men should know how to take a wife in a holy and honorable way, not with a lustful desire, like the heathen who do not know God."

In the preceding verses Paul has been stressing that every Christian has the duty to be holy, to lead a life which develops with the Lord and which should be worthy of its origin and its end, that is, worthy of God. Christians have the obligation to be holy because their God is holy. In the section from verse 3 to verse 8, Paul discusses holiness in marriage. The clue to interpreting verses 4 and 5 correctly is to see that this passage is not a string of different points under the heading of holiness in marriage but a unified discussion of a particular point in that field.

You might think, from reading certain translations, that verse 6 is about cheating in business. Today's English version mistakenly has an illustration here showing a grocer pushing the scales down with his finger while a woman shopper is looking in her purse, but the translation itself is quite right in saying, "In this matter, then, no man should do

wrong to his brother or violate his rights."

Paul is not referring to cheating in business, nor to adultery, but rather to a Greek custom, the right of a daughter who inherited her father's property when no son survived. In such a case, the next of kin had first claim to her hand. As a result, many a man got a quick divorce in order that he might marry a rich heiress. It meant, too, a marriage between close relatives. Apparently it was common for an uncle to marry a niece who had come into a good inheritance. The girl's right to the inheritance was often challenged in court. Sometimes those who contested the matter resorted to violence and seized some of the property in order to argue that possession was nine-tenths of the law. A rather messy business all around, you will no doubt say, but it was a widespread custom among the Greeks. The Christians of the Greek city of Thessalonica had probably asked Paul what they should think of it. His answer is very clear: such marriages are forbidden—they are "porneia" (immorality).

You will notice that I have used the word "probably." I am trying to be fair. The Church has not given any definitive interpretation of this passage. You may follow what you think is the best explanation of it. But if you want to hold that theory about sex being shady, I hope you will see that First Thessalonians 4:4-5 is not a passage you can use with certainty to prove it.

Another theory that has come down through the centuries is that the Jews are guilty of Christ's death, cursed by God for it, and doomed to suffer for it. An extension of this theory is that the Jews are engaged in an on-going world conspiracy, but it will finally be thwarted by God. A still further extension of this theory is that Christians may assist the Lord in thwarting the Jews. Supporters of this collection of ideas have always claimed the support of St. Paul and ultimately of God referring to Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians 2:14-16.

It is this passage, more than any other in the Bible, which has been at the root of anti-

Semitism in the Christian Church. More, you will ask, than Matthew 27:25, where the crowd answers Pilate, "Let the punishment for his death fall on us and on your children"? Yes, because the passage in the Letter to the Thessalonians, it is alleged, is the most explicit spelling out of the divine attitude toward "the Jews." Promoters of this view have held that the passage is divinely inspired theological reflection on the passion and death of Christ and therefore an example of very early development of doctrine in the Scripture itself.

We are not dealing with an ancient misconception that has been laid to rest. One Catholic bishop in Italy has made it clear that he still holds this view even though it has been condemned by the Second Vatican Council.

It took a long time for the Catholic Church to come out clearly and declare that neither the passage from the Letter to the Thessalonians nor any other passage of the Bible may be used to support the collection of ideas about the Jews which I have mentioned, but it finally did so in the Vatican II Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: "Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy scriptures. All should take pains, then, lest in catechetical instruction and in the preaching of God's Word they teach anything out of harmony with the truth of the gospel and the spirit of Christ."

The passage, therefore, is simply the angry outburst of a travelling apostle who finds, wherever he goes, that synagogue officials have heard about him and have taken steps, sometimes by calling the police, to keep him from standing up in the synagogue to preach the new Christian message. Now that the police in Rome are giving the Jews there a hard time, Paul feels things are being evened up. It is not a theological passage. It is an emotional commentary on current events. The effort to see it as a doctrinal passage has been a mistake.

Wednesday, October 21, 1970