

10. Man and nature

On the one hand, man is part of nature. He is the culmination of creation, but he is a creature, not the Creator. Nor is he an angel, confronting nature from outside. Nature is not his machine but his "garden", to be loved, revered, and cared for (Gen 2:15).

On the other hand, man is superior to nature by his reason and free will, and God entrusted him with the "dominion" (lordship or mastery) of nature (Gen 1:28-29). Man is the artist. Nature is his material and his studio. An artist "masters" his material by knowing, loving, and respecting it.

To master his material, an artist must first master himself. "The 'mastery' over the world that God offered man from the beginning was realized above all within man himself: *mastery of self*. The first man was . . . free from the triple concupiscence"⁶ [disordered desire] "that subjugates him" [like an addict] "to the pleasures of the senses" [lust], "covetousness for earthly goods" [greed], "and self-assertion" [pride], "contrary to the dictates of reason" (CCC 377).

Self-mastery comes through the three virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience. (These three are formally taken as lifelong vows by Catholics in religious orders.) They are the three weapons that counter the three key vices of greed, lust, and pride, which come from the three sources of temptation, "the world, the flesh, and the devil" (competitive pride was the invention of the devil, who taught us to want to be "like gods": Gen 3:5).

11. The Fall of man

How did man succumb to temptation? Was the Fall a historical event?

"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"⁷ (CCC 390). The Church does not require us to interpret the creation and Fall stories in *Genesis* literally, but she does insist that they must be interpreted historically, as something that really happened.

For if the creation was not a real historical event (however symbolically that event may have been expressed in *Genesis*) but a mere myth in the popular sense, like Santa Claus, then how did the universe get here?

And if the Fall was not a real historical event (also narrated in symbolical language) but only a myth, then how did sin get here? Sin is a historical fact, as real as the universe. Its cause must also be a historical fact.

12. The origin of evil

There are only two alternatives to the Fall, two other possible answers to the question of the origin of evil. If evil is not our fault, it must be the fault of either what is greater than us or of what is less than us: either God or nature. If a statue has defects, we must blame either its sculptor or its material—unless the statue has free will and altered the sculptor's design.

God is all-good, so he cannot be the origin of evil. And he is all-powerful and created the universe out of nothing, so matter is not the origin of evil; it is subject to his will and is good. The only remaining suspect is the one we see in the mirror.

In confronting the mystery of evil, we must at least be honest enough to begin by admitting the reality of our data: human evil, moral wickedness, sin. "Sin is present in human history; any attempt to ignore it or to give this dark reality other names would be futile" (CCC 386). G. K. Chesterton said sin was the only Christian dogma you could prove simply by reading the daily newspaper.

The only adequate explanation of "horizontal" evil, the evil we do to each other (like Cain's murder of Abel), is the prior story of "vertical" evil: the Fall, man declaring independence from God, the source of all good. "To try to understand what sin is, one must first recognize the *profound relation of man to God*, for only in this relationship is the evil of sin unmasked in its true identity" (CCC 386).

13. The need for divine revelation to understand man

This is why secular explanations of evil are not sufficient. "Without the knowledge Revelation gives of God we cannot recognize sin clearly and are tempted to explain it as merely a developmental flaw, a psychological weakness, a mistake, or the necessary consequence of an inadequate social structure" (CCC 387). Without God's revelation, without the knowledge that human nature in its present state is fallen from the true norm and thus not normal but abnormal, all our judgments of man are upside down. We then see sin as normal and human and see sanctity as abnormal and superhuman, as drunks might see sober people as abnormal. This is precisely the fundamental error about man that is assumed by our secular society. "Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action,⁸ and morals" (CCC 407).

Man is like a caged dog in a railroad station who has chewed off his tag,

⁶ Cf. 1 Jn 2:16.

⁷ Cf. GS 13: § 1.

⁸ Cf. John Paul II, *GA* 25.

so that he does not know his true name or the name of his master. He does not know where he has come from or where he is supposed to be going. Divine revelation gives us back our name tag. It is crucial information. Our master is our Creator, our name is "beloved child of God", and our destiny is heaven. It is crucial to keep this tag, to cherish it, to read and remember it, and to live by it.

14. Sin

The Fall was a fall into sin. What is sin?

"The doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the 'reverse side' of the Good News that Jesus is the Savior" (CCC 389). The Good News presupposes the Bad News, as the prognosis of a cure presupposes the diagnosis of the disease.

The idea of sin is very unpopular in the modern Western world. But it is an essential part of the Christian gospel, and "[t]he Church, which has the mind of Christ," knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ" (CCC 389). For what does Christ the Savior save us from? "You shall call his name Jesus [which means 'Savior', or 'God saves'], for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).

Sin does not mean that we are wholly evil or more evil than good (how could that be measured?) or that our very being is evil or that we are no longer infinitely valuable and infinitely loved by God. It means that we are seriously wounded, a defaced masterpiece. The greater the masterpiece, the more terrible its defacement is.

15. The consequences of the Fall

The Bible, in Genesis 3, "portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve . . . become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image—that of a God jealous of his prerogatives . . ." ⁹ (CCC 399). "[T]he control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered: the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination. ¹⁰ Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. . . . ¹¹ Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true. . . . *Death makes its entrance into human history*" ¹² (CCC 400).

⁹ Cf. 1 Cor 2:16.

¹⁰ Cf. Gen 3:5–10.

¹¹ Cf. Gen 3:7–16.

¹² Cf. Gen 3:17, 19.

¹³ Cf. Rom 5:12.

Once the harmony between our soul and God is broken, all harmonies dependent on that one are broken too: harmony with nature ("thorns and thistles", "the sweat of your brow", and pain in childbirth), harmony between body and soul (illness and death), harmony between man and woman (Adam blames Eve), and harmony between brothers (Cain murders Abel).

16. The three stages of history: Bad news and good news

Human history, like all the stories we tell, has three stages. A situation must always be first set up, then somehow upset, then somehow reset, whether successfully or not. The Bible's story follows these three stages: Creation, Fall, and Redemption. First, the good God creates a good world and man; then man defaces God's creation and himself; then God laboriously sets it right. The three stages are Paradise (Eden), Paradise Lost (the Fall), and Paradise Regained (the Redemption).

(The Rosary goes through these three stages too: first five joyful mysteries, then five sorrowful mysteries, then five glorious mysteries. "One for sorrow, two for joy" [Fulton Sheen])

Already in Genesis 3 we see the beginning of the third stage, Redemption, when God promises Christ's eventual victory over all evil. Genesis 3:15 is the first prophecy of the gospel, the "protoevangelium".

17. Why did God allow sin?

"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.' ¹⁴ 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"; and the' ¹⁵ [Easter liturgy's] "'Exultet sings, "O happy fault, . . . which gained for us so great a Redeemer!"' ¹⁵ (CCC 412).

18. Is man good or evil?

He is both.

Two extremes are perennially possible and popular: pessimism, which denies the goodness of man, and optimism, which denies the evil. The Church rejects both errors.

¹⁴ St. Leo the Great, *Sermo* 73, 4: PL 54, 396.

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* III, 1, 3, ad 3; cf. Rom 5:20.

Thus she rejected Pelagianism, the fifth-century heresy that taught that man is so good that he can save himself without God's grace. Pelagius underestimated original sin and "reduced the influence of Adam's fault to bad example" (CCC 406). But the Church also rejected the teaching of Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century that man is so bad ("totally depraved") that he cannot freely choose to cooperate with God's grace.

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