



EVIL AND GUILT: ON ORIGINAL SIN AND ANCESTRAL SIN

EL MAL Y LA CULPA: SOBRE EL PECADO ORIGINAL Y EL PECADO ANCESTRAL

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Recibido: 04/03/2022

Aceptado: 22/06/2022

ABSTRACT

Since the times of Augustine, there has been a philosophical and theological debate on the inheritance of guilt on the interpretation of Original Sin. This debate turns on the early Church Fathers of the first centuries, signalled by the Neo-Patristic movement within the Orthodox Church in its accusations of heresy against the Catholic Church and proposing the very different notion of "Ancestral Sin". This paper will evaluate this debate and discuss the history of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, and propose a new interpretation of the notion of "Original Sin" that offers an understanding of the nature of human beings and their relationship to evil without assuming the notion of the inheritance of guilt for the sin of Adam and Eve.

Keywords: ancestral sin, anthropology, evil, guilt, original sin, sin.

RESUMEN

Desde los tiempos de Agustín de Hipona existe un debate filosófico y teológico sobre el carácter hereditario de la culpa en la interpretación del pecado original. Este debate gira alrededor de la interpretación de los primeros Padres de la Iglesia y ha sido destacado por el movimiento neopatrístico de la Iglesia Ortodoxa como uno de los motivos para acusar de herejía a la Iglesia Católica. En su lugar esta corriente propone una noción distinta, que consideran muy diferente: la del “pecado ancestral”. Este artículo evalúa este debate y discute su historia en los Padres de la Iglesia, especialmente en Agustín. También se propone una nueva interpretación del pecado original que, a nuestro juicio, ofrece una mejor comprensión de la naturaleza de los seres humanos y de su relación con el mal, sin asumir que los seres humanos hereden la culpa por el pecado de Adán y Eva.

Palabras clave: antropología, culpa, mal, pecado ancestral, pecado original.

I. INTRODUCTION: "ORIGINAL SIN" AND "ANCESTRAL SIN"

In 1936 the theologian Georges Florovsky participated in the First Congress of Orthodox Theology (Athens, November 28 to December 6, 1936) with two very remarkable contributions: "Western Influences in Russian Theology"¹ and "Modern Patristics and Theology"². In the first, he reflected on the strong influence of the Catholic Church and Protestantism on Orthodox theology, particularly in Russia, highlighting some elements that were suspected of heterodoxy. This influence was, in his opinion, an unfortunate Latinisation he described as "pseudo-morphosis". In the second, he stressed the need for a renewal of Orthodox theology oriented, in his opinion, by a return "to the spirit" of the Church Fathers. These two texts are usually considered to initiate the "Neo-Patristics" movement within the Orthodox Church³.

Neo-Patristics was the most important theological movement of the 20th century within Orthodox Christianity, and its renovating influence, through a

1 "Westliche Einflüsse in der Russischen Theologie", *Kyrios* 1 (1937): 1-22. English translation: Brandon Gallaher, Paul Ladouceur, ed., "Western influences in Russian Theology", in *The Patristic Witness of George Florovsky* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2019), 129-152.

2 Hamilcar Alivisatos, ed., *Procès-Verbaux du Premier Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe* (Athens: Pysos, 1939), 238-242.

3 Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Du 'Retour aux Pères' à la nécessité d'une théologie orthodoxe moderne", *Istina* 56 (2011): 227-251.

return to the Eastern Church Fathers and the extirpation of Catholic influences, brought together theologians of the stature of Justin Popovic (1894-1979), Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), John Zizioulas (born in 1931), John Meyendorff (1926-1992), Christos Yannaras (born in 1935) and John Romanides (1927-2001).

In 1957, Romanides produced his doctoral thesis in Greek entitled *The Ancestral Sin*⁴, which is considered "the first systematic attempt to compare Augustine's doctrine of grace, free will, and predestination to the first-and second-century Orthodox writers (mostly Greek) who had written on the same topic"⁵. Romanides maintained that the interpretation of Original Sin by Augustine was substantially different from the position of the Church Fathers who preceded him, leading to a heretical doctrine that the Orthodox Church should categorically reject, returning to the vision of Original Sin held during the early centuries and referring rather to the notion of "Ancestral Sin". Specifically, his criticism is aimed at Augustine's notion that all men inherit Adam's guilt. If in the Latin tradition, as he affirms erroneously as we shall see, this guilt explains why all men are subject to imperfection and death, and the need for baptism, Romanides insists that the notion of hereditary guilt arises from Augustine, contradicts previous teachings, and is in fact heretical.

The propositions of Romanides were largely welcomed within the Orthodox Church, which had already accepted two theses by Florovsky with which *The Ancestral Sin* was perfectly in line: a re-examination and restoration of the early Church Fathers as a source for spiritual renewal and the need to free Orthodoxy from excessive "Latin" influence.

II. THE CHURCH FATHERS ON THE TRANSMISSION OF THE GUILT OF ADAM AND EVE TO THE REST OF HUMANITY

There are two fundamental lines within the debate of the Church Fathers on the sin of Adam and Eve: its transmission to subsequent generations and its consequences. First, as Gerald Bray points out, there is a clear difference between traducianists and creationists. Secondly, there is a decisive change between the reflections of the Church Fathers of the first three centuries and the emphasis on the transmission of the guilt by fourth-century authors such as Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, and, above all, Augustine of Hippo. Augustine's

4 John Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin* (Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr Publishing, 1998).

5 Georges Demacopoulos, Aristotle Papanikolaou, ed., *Orthodox Readings of Augustine* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008).

reading of John Chrysostom in his Homily 10 on the Epistle to the Romans is notable for his comments on this part of verse 5:19: "by one man's disobedience many were made sinners".

1. TRADUCIANISM AND CREATIONISM

Traducianism defends the notion that both the body and the soul are created at the moment of generation; both realities are inherited from the parents. This is the position held, for example, by Tertullian, in the opinion of most of the interpreters⁶, especially based on his *De Anima*⁷. According to his point of view, in procreation the child receives a part of the soul of the father, and thus all children of Adam through successive generations inherit Original Sin and all its consequences including not only death, the weakness of the flesh and the inclination to sin (*concupiscentia*), but also guilt. We all share the guilt for Adam's sin⁸.

At the other extreme, among the Creationists is Origen of Alexandria, who affirmed not only that each individual soul is created by God but also that all souls pre-exist their incarnation. Thus, each soul has the possibility of choosing to side with God or to separate from Him. Many souls chose the latter, but to varying degrees, and the human being lies in an intermediate stage, with the freedom to choose between good and evil⁹.

Thus, all human beings have freely chosen to separate themselves from God, making them guilty by nature; this is a decision made by them, not inherited from Adam, and in this way such a decision leads to the consequences of what we call Original Sin. Additionally, and no less importantly, this interpretation of Origen becomes for him a strong justification for the early baptism of children¹⁰.

The comparison between Tertullian and Origen offers an initial approach to the problem of Original Sin, although, in reality, they represent the two extremes of Traducianism and Creationism within a much more complex debate.

6 Jerónimo Leal, "Las dos almas de la Teología del siglo III: Tertuliano, De anima - Orígenes De principiis", *Teología y Vida* 55 (2014): 7-27.

7 In expressions such as the following: "cuius anima uelut surculus quidam ex matrice Adam". *De Anima*, 19, 6.

8 John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2013), 64-65.

9 Origen, *De Principiis*, in Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers. Volume 4*. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 257.

10 He refers to it in three passages: *Homilies on Luke* 14, 5; *Homilies on Leviticus* 8, 3, 5; y *Commentary on Romans* 5, 9, 11. On these passages and Origen's position on infant baptism: Everett Ferguson, "Baptism according to Origen", *Evangelical Quarterly: An International Review of Bible and Theology* 78.2 (2006): 129-132.

2. FROM JUSTIN MARTYR TO THE CAPPADOCIANS FATHERS

The second distinction mentioned above is that between the Church Fathers of the first three centuries and Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, and, above all, Augustine, on the other. The discussion has less to do with the origin and consequences of sin as with the transmission of guilt from Adam and Eve to their descendants. Do all share responsibility for Adam's sin?

Very early Justin Martyr made reference to Adam introducing sin into the world, thus leading human beings to have an inclination toward evil that demons could take advantage of. However, temptation was not enough to explain human action, because its ultimate cause is always free will, meaning that everyone is responsible for their own sins, and not those of their parents, their ancestors, or even those of Adam himself.

However, it was Irenaeus of Lyon who later in the same 2nd century first attempted to explain in some detail the cause of Adam's sin, and what it meant for the rest of humanity.

Irenaeus wishes to emphasise the difference between Adam and Eve in Paradise and the rest of humanity, insisting that they had been created and lied as children, "and it was not possible for them to conceive and understand anything of that which by wickedness through lusts and shameful desires is born in the soul"¹¹. In reading Book IV of *Adversus Haereses*, we see that this "childhood" is not literal: it means that God created human beings and all things in a path of perfection, needing to grow and develop to become what they are called to be: "By this arrangement, therefore, and these harmonies, and a sequence of this nature, man, a created and organised being, is rendered after the image [*eikon*] and likeness [*homoiosis*] of the uncreated God. (...) but man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One"¹².

According to Irenaeus, Adam suffered the fall because of four factors: his finitude and consequent ignorance of God¹³, the temptations of the devil¹⁴, and his freedom¹⁵. However, his fall was also somehow beneficial for humanity, as it allowed mankind to learn and walk the path towards deification. If Irenaeus makes a connection between Adam's guilt and our own, and how we may share

11 Proof of the Apostolic Preaching, 14; Against Heresies, 4, 38, 1

12 *Against...*, 4, 38, 3.

13 *Against...*, 4, 38, 2.

14 *Proof...*, 16.

15 *Against...*, 4, 39, 1.

responsibility for it, such a connection is according to Williams¹⁶ "vague and a far cry from the strongly articulated ideas of Augustine on the same matter"¹⁷.

Texts of the Three Cappadocian Fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen) also suggest the hereditary nature of Adam's sin. All three seem to indicate that imperfection and mortality stem from this sin, but do not necessarily include the notion of guilt.

Gregory of Nyssa is the only Greek Church Father who wrote an entire book on the fate of children who die unbaptised¹⁸, and it is here that we find a relevant testimony on the thinking of the Cappadocian Fathers in this regard. Specifically, both Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen, in *Oration on Holy Baptism*, affirm that unbaptised children are guiltless. Thus, we can affirm along with Temlett that "we see almost no conception of sharing in the guilt of Adam"¹⁹. This opinion is also shared by Williams and Kelly²⁰.

3. AUGUSTINE'S INTERPRETATION OF AMBROSIASTER AND CHRYSOSTOM

According to Toews, it was Ambrose who with his "internalisation of sin married to the concept of 'hereditary sin' paved the way for his student, Augustine, and his doctrine of Original Sin"²¹. However, the most famous text on the subject is found in Ambrosiaster, a contemporary of Ambrose. It was Ambrosiaster, Temlett believes, who led Augustine towards the position he ultimately adopted on this subject²².

Valdervelde²³ calls attention to the commentary of Ambrosiaster on the Epistle to the Romans, especially the translation and interpretation of verse 5,

16 Norman Powel Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin: A Historical Critical Study* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1927), 197. John Norman Davidson Kelly is more emphatic when he affirms, interpreting the texts of Irenaeus, that "all men participated in Adam's deed and therefore shared in his guilt". J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977), 172.

17 Sebastian Paul Temlett, *The Sins of Our Fathers: The Doctrine of Original Sin and Its Implications for Believers in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Traditions Today* (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2018), 12.

18 Gregory of Nyssa, "De infantibus praeputis abreptis libellum", in J. Kenneth Downing, Jacob A. McDonough, Hadwig Hömer, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni opera dogmatica minora*, (Leiden, New York, København, Köln: Brill, 1987), 65-97.

19 Temlett, *The Sins of Our Fathers*..., 16.

20 Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall*..., 278. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*..., 350.

21 Toews, *The Story of Original Sin*..., 67.

22 Temlett, *The Sins of Our Fathers*..., 19.

23 George Valdervelde, *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Reinterpretation* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 8.

12. For this text, Ambrosiaster uses a Latin translation from the New Testament, in which the preposition ἐφ' ᾧ (*eph' ho*) is translated into Latin as *in quo* (in whom), whereas the correct translation would be *quod* (because), thus resulting in the following interpretation: "In whom, that is, in Adam, all sinned. The Apostle said 'in whom' in the masculine gender although he is speaking about the woman, for this reason, that his reference is to the whole race of man (...). So then it is plain that all have sinned in Adam as in a lump (*quasi in massa*); for all the children whom Adam begat, having been himself corrupted by the woman through sin, have been born under sin. From him therefore all are sinner, because from him are we all"²⁴. Thus, Ambrosiaster bequeathed to Western tradition a misunderstanding that authors such as Augustine would take at face value, with a decisive influence on his own theological perspective²⁵. This was despite the fact that Ambrosiaster himself explicitly denied the hereditary nature of guilt in his refutation of Traducianism²⁶.

In addition to Ambrose and Ambrosiaster, another decisive influence on the doctrine of Original Sin in Augustine was John Chrysostom, through the reading of his 10th Homily, *On Romans*.

Chrysostom, according to Papageorgiou²⁷, never used the term "Original Sin", but rather "the sin which he [Adam] introduced", and in a very particular context. For him, the sin of Adam, bringing death into the world, has significance *before* the Law of Moses was handed down, after which it lost importance. In any case, the effect of sin is not related to the guilt of the descendants of Adam, but to the fact this sin brought death into the world²⁸. Other consequences of sin, according to Chrysostom, are shame, fear, and suffering. Moreover, the body became unruly and subject to a multitude of raging passions. There is nothing here that suggests the hereditary nature of guilt.

The decisive testimony, however, is found when Chrysostom interprets verse 5, 19, asking: "But how would it follow that from his disobedience another would become a sinner?". This indicates that no one may be regarded a sinner if they do not sin through their own free will, that is, no one may be held responsible for the actions of others, including their ancestors. He concludes that the meaning is

24 Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans*, V, 12.

25 Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall...*, 309.

26 Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans*, VII, 22.

27 Panayiotis Papageorgiou, "Chrysostom and Augustine on the Sin of Adam and its Consequences", *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 39.4 (1995): 361-378.

28 At the beginning of Homily 10 we can read: "But what means, 'for that all have sinned?' This; he having once fallen, even they that had not eaten of the tree did from him, all of them, become mortal".

simply the following: "that by Adam's death we all became mortals".

Finally, it should be noted that, as with Irenaeus, Chrysostom also thinks that mortality somehow benefits mankind, because it offers an opportunity for our development towards deification or union with God.

Evidently, Augustine was familiar with this homily by Chrysostom, his contemporary, as demonstrated in *Contra Julianum*. It would seem that Julian quoted some passages from Chrysostom's *Baptismal Instructions* to support his own position that human beings are born free from Original Sin. Augustine responds to this statement by taking into consideration several statements by the Church Fathers, which he interprets as affirming the contrary, making particular note of passages from Chrysostom himself. We must bear in mind, however, that Augustine is selecting and interpreting the works of the Church Fathers within the context of the polemic against Pelagianism, which influences his perspective²⁹.

The first text by Chrysostom quoted by Augustine is from the *Homilies to the Neophytes*. Augustine interprets Chrysostom to mean that while infants do not have sins, they do not have sins "of their own". Julian interpreted this same text to mean "they are not defiled by the sin of the first man (*non eos peccato primi hominis inquinatos*)"³⁰. It seems that Julian is leaning towards a more refined hermeneutics, as noted previously. Augustine would later quote the *Letter to Olympias*, the *Homily on the Raising of Lazarus* and the *Homily on Romans*, but here again he interprets them to favour and support his own views. No doubt, Chrysostom would have accepted that death came to humanity because of the transgressions of Adam (ultimately to our benefit), but would not accept the notion of inherited guilt.

However, from the Council of Carthage of 418 (Canons 1 to 3) and the Second Council of Orange of 529 (Canons 1 and 2) on, both very concerned with Pelagianism, Latin theology was temporarily oriented towards the notion of the inheritance of Adam's guilt³¹, which became official doctrine in the West. However, it should be noted that it was also accepted on many occasions in the Orthodox world, as seen in the much more recent *Orthodox Catechism* of Metropolitan Sotirios Athanassoulas³². However, as noted at the beginning of this article, a strong movement against Latin influences within Orthodoxy led to a revision of this

29 Peter B. Ely, "Chrysostom and Augustine on the Ultimate Meaning of Human Freedom", *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 29 (2006): 166-167.

30 Augustine, *Contra Julianum Pelagianum*, 22.

31 Bray, *Original Sin...*, 43.

32 Sotirios Athanassoulas, *Orthodox Catechism: Basic Teachings of the Orthodox Faith* (Toronto: Greek Orthodox Diocese of Toronto, 1996), 52-53.

concept, especially from the publication of the thesis by John Romanides. Today, it is common among the Orthodox to distinguish between Original Sin and Ancestral Sin, accepting the latter only. Such a difference is fundamentally based on the rejection of the hereditary character of Adam's guilt, and this leads many Orthodox theologians to accuse Catholics of heresy on this issue.

III. TOWARDS A NEW INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 3

No doubt, a survey of the writings of the Church Fathers and, in general, the Traditions of the Church and the most eminent reflections of the most illustrious thinkers, provides an insight into the great questions of the human being and also of our world today. However, there is a certain unjustified romanticism among those who believe the earliest Christians, apart from the Apostles or those with an immediate closeness to Christ, have a better knowledge of the Christian faith and its implications because they lived closer in time to the events narrated in New Testament. Ultimately, there is a veiled suspicion of evolution in theology, as if the passage of time deposits a residue that impedes our clear vision and understanding of Scripture.

In fact, every era has its prejudices, its cultural implications and its influences, and the early theologians of the first centuries were no exception, affected as they were by a Neo-Platonic view and other conditions of their particular life, culture, and personal experiences. If we interpret ancient texts from our own particular time and vantage point, even while considering them inspired, we must take into account that they too lived within their own frame of reference. We must not ignore or overlook this when assessing the hermeneutic criteria both of ourselves and the authors of the past.

One of the factors to be considered is the particular perception of the Church Fathers of ancient narratives. Their relationship with "mythical" stories and their conception of their truthfulness are very different from our own.

The Fathers of the Church did not approach the story of Adam and Eve as a 19th century historian, seeking to determine its historical exactitude. Their view on these stories is rather what Mircea Eliade has called "true stories". These are mythical descriptions which are considered true while clearly differentiated from stories or fables ("false stories"). The difference is that the importance of "true stories" lies not in the specific facticity of the details of the story, but in the meaning or truth of its message about nature and the origin of the world. "The cosmogonic myth is 'true' because the existence of the world is there to prove it; the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man's

mortality proves it, and so on (...). If the world *exists*, if man *exists*, it is because Supernatural Beings exercised creative powers in the 'beginning'. But after the cosmogony and the creation of man other events occurred, and “man *as he is today*” is the direct result of those mythical events, *he is constituted by those events*. He is mortal because something happened *in illo tempore*³³.

By this we do not mean to suggest the Church Fathers did not believe the account in Genesis 3 to be true. But rather that they did not share our contemporary notions of historicity and, if they considered it "historical" or "real", it was because it adequately expressed the nature of man as they knew it from their personal experience. In short, because it seemed to them a very appropriate anthropology, giving veracity to the text.

From a contemporary viewpoint, avoiding an empty and sterile debate on the “historical” basis of the story of Adam and Eve, we will focus on the splendid description of “man *as he is today*”.

There are two creation stories in Genesis, and both speak of the appearance of humans on Earth, although only in the second do we find what came to be called “Original Sin”. There is the story of how Yahweh planted in Eden a garden full of life, with all kinds of trees appearing beautiful and tasty for their first inhabitants. Adam was told that he could eat from all the trees he found, with one exception: the tree "of the knowledge of good and evil." God also warned him that if he consumed the fruit of that tree, he would die. Here we find a ban, as well as a warning, to which we will return shortly.

In no way does this restriction seem vexing to Adam and Eve who, in the light of the text, felt no attraction to the fruits of that tree. In fact, this is what the account of the temptation of the serpent shows us. Here we see how the serpent approaches Eve and asks: "Has God truly said that you may not take of the fruit of any tree in the garden?", that is, suggesting a false idea that God is arbitrary and cruel in his commandments, as if these contained no hint of rationality, but merely an unjustified imperative command. The serpent thus wants to introduce suspicion about the goodness of God and his indications, demanding reasons for them. As Eve replies that Yahweh allowed them to eat from any tree except one, because it would lead them to death, the serpent concentrates on this exception to say: "Death will not certainly come to you: For

33 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 11. Similarly, and more directly related to Christian stories is C. S. Lewis' concept of “true myth” as explained by Erwin Soto Sapriza in his doctoral thesis *El 'mito verdadero' y las metáforas doctrinales de C. S. Lewis* (Universidad de Navarra, 2005), or Alister McGrath: *C. S. Lewis: A Life. Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 2016).

God sees that on the day when you take of its fruit, your eyes will be open, and you will be as gods, having knowledge of good and evil".

With this statement he seeks to shake the trust that Eve has placed in God, by raising a temptation that is as valid in ancient times as in modern ones: the idea that God, rather than being pure goodness, only subjects to his will through ignorance.

What follows, Eve's reaction, is not always given due attention. The text tells us that it was then that "the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and a delight to the eyes, and to be desired to make one wise". Although there are different translations of these verses, the Hebrew verb that designates what Eve felt at that time has the usual sense of designating what is "desirable" or, in another very suggestive version, what is "charming".

As we see, neither Adam nor Eve had paid attention to the tree before; that is, it was not on the horizon of their needs and desires. We must not forget that Paradise is where our desires are immediately fulfilled, and so appears in all the stories of ancient peoples: the happy life as one in which needs and desires are easily fulfilled.

Seen from another perspective, we may affirm a correspondence between the nature of Adam and Eve, their desire, and reality, that is, only trees that were suitable for them appeared as objects of desire, and they had no desire for those that were not. When the serpent kindles Eve's desire for the tree "of the knowledge of good and evil" what is meant is that this perfect correspondence has been broken, and desire has overflowed its channels, directing itself at both what is appropriate to the human being (the good) and what is not (the evil). In this story, the confusion of man "*as he is*" is displayed. From this it is easy to consider that both our intelligence and our will are damaged, not only in relation to Adam and Eve before the Fall, but also in terms of our desire for the good. In other words, our perfect and clear understanding of what is good has been damaged.

We must also remember that Adam and Eve had clear and direct indications from God and disobeyed them.

Our usual explanation in the West about "Original Sin" tends to focus on this latter aspect: disobedience, emphasising the notion of guilt. This interpretation does not lend itself to our understanding of *what man is*, which we suggest was the original intention, but rather to establish *causality* between disobedience and our condition through the notion of guilt. Thus, not God but Adam is responsible for the evil to which all creation and we ourselves are

subject. Augustine had a very special interest in making this clear, in order to respond forcefully both to the Manichaeism of his times as well as to Pelagianism and any form of Gnosticism.

Turning to the story itself, we see that mortality is the result of eating from the tree. This does not appear as a punishment but as the natural consequence of the consumption of its fruits. God forbids Adam to eat from the tree, and warns him of the consequences that flow from it, but this could be compared to what a father does when he forbids his son to drink bleach, with a warning that he could die or suffer serious harm if he does. In this example we would never consider that the consequences that the child would suffer when drinking bleach are a punishment imposed by the father for his disobedience.

IV. THE DECREE *DE PECCATO ORIGINALI*

The pronouncements on Original Sin of the Councils of Carthage and Orange became part of the ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church, but the most important document in this regard is, today, the Decree *De peccato originali* of the Council of Trent, adopted at the fifth session of the Council, on June 17, 1546³⁴. Pope John Paul II spoke on this Decree at the General Audience of October 1, 1986.

The Decree is divided into five points, although only the first three directly deal with the issue at hand.

The first notes that Adam, "when he had transgressed the commandment of God in Paradise, immediately lost the holiness and justice wherein he had been constituted; and that he incurred, through the offence of that prevarication, the wrath and indignation of God, and consequently death". The loss of holiness and justice, as the second point indicates, affected both him and his descendants, that is, all of humanity.

In his commentary on this Decree, Pope John Paul II reasons on the historical difficulties of the translation of Romans 5:12, as seen above, concluding that St. Paul links the situation of sin in which all men find themselves to the guilt of Adam. However, he does not speak of the inheritance of guilt itself but rather the consequences of that sin.

34 Zoltán Alszegehy and Maurizio Flick, "Il Decreto Tridentino Sul Peccato Originale", *Gregorianum* 52.4 (1971): 595-637.

The third point of the Decree explicitly states that Adam's sin is transmitted to all "by propagation, not by imitation", found in each of us as if a sin of our own.

After quoting this text, John Paul II affirms that "original sin is transmitted by natural generation" and immediately goes on to make certain important clarifications. Firstly, he notes that "it is clear that, for the descendants of Adam, *original sin does not have the character of personal guilt*" and goes on to state that the principal consequence of original sin "is *the deprivation of sanctifying grace*", and that it is a "sin of nature" that can only refer to the "sin of the person" by analogy. Thus, the descendants of Adam no longer benefit from the sanctifying grace which enriched the natural state of man; and so, they are reduced to their natural state, and "therefore man is conceived and born without sanctifying grace".

Thus, neither the Tridentine Decree nor the commentary of Pope John Paul II make any reference to the hereditary nature of guilt, but rather the consequences: the death of body and soul, sorrows, sufferings and the loss of the sanctifying grace of God.

This position of John Paul II is also that of Thomas Aquinas³⁵. According to Saint Thomas, sin is not transmitted from one generation to the next, not even if one believes the soul is wholly or partly transmitted from one generation to the next, because "the fact of having a defect by the way of origin seems to exclude the notion of guilt, which is essentially something voluntary". The question is not, therefore, the inheritance of guilt but simply common human nature: "Therefore we must explain the matter otherwise by saying that all men born of Adam may be considered as one man, inasmuch as they have one common nature, which they receive from their first parents. (...) And just as the actual sin that is committed by a member of the body, is not the sin of that member, except inasmuch as that member is a part of the man, for which reason it is called a 'human sin'; so original sin is not the sin of this person, except inasmuch as this person receives his nature from his first parent, for which reason it is called the 'sin of nature'".

V. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the discussion between the Catholic and Orthodox faiths regarding "Original Sin" or "Ancestral Sin" turns on the hereditary character of

35 *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 81 a. 1.

guilt. This discussion is derived from Augustine's interpretation of John Chrysostom's critique of Pelagianism and his defence of the baptism of infants.

Augustine's position was generally accepted by both the Catholic and Orthodox faiths. They generally accepted both Augustine's position regarding the necessity of baptism for salvation, even if there is no personal sin, and his arguments around inherited guilt.

However, we have seen that neither St. Thomas Aquinas, nor the *Decree De peccato originali* of the Council of Trent, nor the much later commentary by John Paul II maintains this notion. Furthermore, predominant Orthodox theology of the 20th and 21st century explicitly rejects the idea that Adam's guilt was inherited by his descendants. At the same time, however, we see how inherited guilt is not necessary to explain the fallen nature of humanity.

It is true that for the traducianists, in the transmission of the soul "stained by sin" from parents to children, one can speak of the transmission of guilt, but also that, as St. Thomas affirms, one position does not necessarily lead to the other. Guilt is individual, and arises from acts of one's own free will.

Creationists face another difficulty, in that if each individual soul is created by God, why does God create imperfect souls? If we look at the reflection of St. Thomas, the explanation appears simple: because we are human, and human nature is such that it lacks the sanctifying grace that Adam and Eve had. Because of their sin, this grace is not transmitted to the rest of mankind, who remain as they are "by nature".

If this is so, we cannot say that God makes the souls of men imperfect, but rather creates them as simply human; that is, in need of divine grace to achieve deification. We are created, finite beings who develop over time on the path of our perfection. By our nature, by our ascetic or moral efforts, we can only reach the degree of perfection allowed by our nature and we can only aspire to eternity and holiness by the action of God.

All created beings can reach the degree of perfection according to their nature and are not created imperfect by God. A cat, a dog, a donkey or a whale are not perfect, and at most they can achieve the perfection of their own nature (far from the "ideal perfection" or the "perfection of God"). Thus, we cannot throw accusations against the divine creator.

The story of the Fall is a mythical account, and was interpreted by the Fathers of the Church in the context of their own time. We, from our time, cannot affirm that the inspiration of the hagiographer is based on a precise, "historical" narrative of events which they cannot know. We affirm, and this can also be seen in the

“creation stories” of other cultures, that Genesis is an extraordinary account of a gaze illuminated by Grace that explains what mankind is.

Our culture has read the account of the Fall of Adam and Eve, often placing inordinate emphasis on the notion of guilt, projecting it onto subsequent generations to the present. This has led to the notion of guilt becoming a central aspect of Western culture, with all it entails regarding the cause of that guilt, that is, responsibility and, consequently, grief. This is a decisive aspect for a correct understanding of our culture and the way we interpret it, and the notion of sin, in the social and personal sphere. On so many occasions we have insisted on the importance of conscience and will which, while very important, should not lead us to forget that we alone, no matter how much we perfect our nature, will never be perfect or achieve salvation. We need the Grace of God.

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