

THE PATH OF LIBERATION: FROM SIN TO GRACE

The Light of Faith (VIII)

After Adam and Eve had eaten of the fruit of the forbidden tree, God *drove out the man; and at the East of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:24)*. Thus began the drama of human history. Man and woman would thenceforth wander as exiles from their true homeland, whose chief characteristic was communion with God. As Dante so aptly expresses it at the beginning of his *Divine Comedy*: “Halfway through our life’s journey / I woke to find myself within a dark wood / because I had strayed from the correct path.”¹ However, this wayfaring was not to be a night without light. God also sounded a note of hope: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel (Gen 3:15)*. The coming of Christ would mark the passage from sin to the life of grace.

The original “guilt”

It is the knowledge of God that gives rise to the sense of sin, and not the other way around. We cannot understand original sin and its consequences as long as we fail to appreciate, in the first place, God’s goodness in creating mankind, as well as the greatness of our destiny. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “The first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him, in a state that would be surpassed only by the glory of the new creation in Christ.”²

The sin of Adam and Eve produced a deep fissure in the human being’s inner unity. The obedience of the human will to the divine Will was as it were the “keystone” upholding the harmony among the bodily and spiritual faculties of human nature; when disrupted by our first parents’ disobedience the whole edifice came crashing down. As a consequence, “the harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul’s spiritual faculties over the body is shattered.”³

This first sin is called “original sin,” and is transmitted, along with human nature, from parents to their children, with the sole exception, by a special divine privilege, of the Blessed Virgin Mary. *By one man’s disobedience many were made sinners (Rom 5:19)*, Saint Paul says.

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto I, 1-3.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 374.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 400.

Certainly, this reality is difficult to understand, even somewhat scandalous to the moral thinking of our time: “If I myself did not do anything, why should I be charged with this sin?”

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* addresses this concern: “It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice. And that is why original sin is called ‘sin’ only in an analogical sense⁴: it is a sin ‘contracted’ and not ‘committed’ – a state and not an act.”⁵ Reflecting on how to grasp better this reality, Ronald Knox wrote: “It would save a deal of trouble if we all agreed to call original sin ‘original guilt.’ Because sin, in the mind of the common man, is something which he commits himself, whereas guilt is something he may get involved in through no fault of his own.”⁶

And this is the case with original sin. Our first parents sinned, and as a result lost the original holiness and justice that God had granted them; their nature was left “wounded in the natural powers proper to it, subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin.”⁷ Since no one can leave as an inheritance what they no longer possess, Adam and Eve could not leave us what they had lost: the state of original holiness and justice, and the integrity of human nature. They passed on to us a human nature just as it was at that moment, wounded by sin. As Saint Augustine said: “Nothing else could be born of them than that which they themselves had been. Their nature was deteriorated in proportion to the greatness of the condemnation of their sin, so that what existed as punishment in those who first sinned, became a natural consequence in their children.”⁸

Thus original sin is the cause of the state in which we find ourselves, because of the marred inheritance we have received. But as the *Catechism* states, “original sin does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam’s descendants.”⁹ We all come into the world affected by its consequences, namely, a certain ignorance in our intellect, a life marked by suffering, subjection to the dominion of death, and a will inclined to sin and the tug of disordered passions. Everyone has experienced this fragmentation, this incoherence and internal weakness. How often we decide on a course of action, only to find we end up not doing it: the decision to eat a healthy diet, to dedicate time daily to learning a language, to treat one’s children more gently, to not get angry with a parent or spouse, to not complain about our work, to help a poor person or a sick person, to generously accompany the most vulnerable, to speak well of others and rejoice in their successes, to look at other persons and the world around us with a clean heart... Not to mention all the times we do exactly what we don’t want to do: getting carried

⁴ Analogy involves a relationship of similarity between different things. In this case, analogy means that original sin as transmitted to us is seen to have a resemblance to sin, but that it is different from personal sin.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 404.

⁶ Knox, Ronald, *The Hidden Stream*, Burns and Oates, London 1952, p. 164.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 405.

⁸ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIII, III, 1.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 405.

away by an outburst of unjustified anger; giving in to laziness, instead of serving with love; resorting to a lie, so as not to look bad; giving free reign to curiosity on the internet....

We also experiences the tyranny of desires that, in vehemently seeking an apparent, limited good (a particular pleasure, privilege, power, fame, money, etc.), drag a weakened will along with it. In doing so, they turn the will away from the human person's true and integral good: attaining happiness by sharing in God's life. By the same token, the intellect, which should act as a light to indicate our true goal in life, is darkened and runs the risk of becoming a mere instrument for attaining what a will enslaved by disordered desire has already decided to seek.

But not everything in man is accursed, far from it. Human nature has not been totally corrupted, and it retains its essential goodness. We come into the world with the "seeds" of all the virtues, which are meant to be developed by the exercise of our freedom, under the influence of God's grace, and with the help of others. Actually, virtue is more in keeping with what we truly are than is sin, which is always an act against nature, a "suicidal act."¹⁰ As Benedict XVI expressed it: "People say: 'he lied, but that's only human,' 'he stole it, but that's only human.' But this is not really being human. Being human means being generous, being good, being a just person."¹¹

From slavery to liberation

At the root of all sin is some doubt about God, the suspicion that perhaps He isn't willing or able to make us happy: "Is He really as good as He claims to be? Isn't He deceiving us?" *Did God say, You shall not eat of any tree of the garden? (Gen 3:1)*, the serpent asks Eve. When she replies no, that God has forbidden their eating only from the tree in the middle of the garden in order not to die, the serpent sows the venom of distrust in her heart: *You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil (Gen 3:4-5)*. In reality, behind this false promise of boundless freedom, of an absolute autonomy of the will (which is impossible for a creature), a great lie is hidden. For when we try to decide on our own what our will should desire, without relying on God's help and guidance, a crust of evil is formed that enslaves us and shackles us, and that prevents us from being happy because it separates us from God.

Sin is an ever-present possibility since we are free; its very existence depends on our freedom, but in the end it kills freedom. It promises a lot but brings only sorrow and pain. It is a deception that makes us *slaves of sin (Rom 6:17)*. "Evil is not a creature, but something like a parasitic plant. It lives off what it wrests from others and ends up killing itself, just as a parasitic plant does, when it seizes its host and kills it."¹²

¹⁰ Saint John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2 December 1984), no. 15.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Meeting with the parish priests of the diocese of Rome, 18 February 2010.

¹² Ratzinger, Joseph, *God and the World*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2000.

Sin entered human history by a misuse of freedom, and the remedy for sin also began through a free decision. Our Lady's *let it be done to me according to your word* (Lk 1:38), uttered with full freedom, inaugurated a new stage in mankind's history, the fullness of time. The Son of God came down to earth to give his life in a supreme act of freedom, born of Love: *My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt* (Mt 26:39). And hence we can now respond with full freedom to his invitation to live with the *glorious freedom of the children of God* (Rom 8:21).

It is our freedom as God's children that enables us to let ourselves be looked at and healed by our Lord, going with humility to the One who renews us interiorly by his grace. "God's will is not a law for the human being imposed from the outside and that constrains him, but the intrinsic measure of his nature, a measure that is engraved within him and makes him the image of God, and hence, a free creature."¹³ God in fact is the One who guarantees our freedom. Those who let themselves be loved by God, who trust in Him and believe in his Love, are truly free. Through faith, we are freed from the limits imposed on us by doubt, lies, blindness and a meaningless world. Through hope, the fear, discouragement, restlessness and guilt that tie us down dissolve. Through charity, we leave behind the selfishness, greed, self-absorption, frustration and bitterness that restrict the scope of our life.

God's grace

Saint John Paul II wrote in his last book: "Redemption is the divine limit imposed on evil, for the simple reason that in it evil is radically defeated by good, hatred by love, and death by the Resurrection."¹⁴ God's response to our sins is the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Redemption carried out by Him. *Christ was put to death for our trespasses* (Rom 4:25), Saint Paul says. He reconciles us with God, frees us from the slavery of sin and grants us the gift of grace, a "gratuitous gift that God gives us to make us participants in his Trinitarian life and able to act by his love."¹⁵ We should never grow accustomed to this reality. Grace is an unmerited gift, a participation in the divine life, introducing us into the loving intimacy of God and enabling us to act in a new way, as God's children.

Grace is much more powerful than sin, for *where sin increased, grace abounded all the more* (Rom 5:20). In a famous novel, the main character goes to the confessional and confesses sins she says are very serious. But the confessor tells her: "'No, my daughter,' he said in a quiet, almost matter-of-fact tone of voice, 'you have not offended God more grievously than have countless other people. Go on trying to be humble, even in the acknowledgement of your sin. In

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 8 December 2005.

¹⁴ Saint John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, Phoenix 2005.

¹⁵ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 423.

your life, the only great thing has been grace. Only grace is always great. Sin in itself, one's own sin, is little and ordinary."¹⁶

As Saint Josemaria assured us: "Our Father in heaven pardons any offence when his child returns to him, when he repents and asks for pardon. The Lord is such a good Father that he anticipates our desire to be pardoned and comes forward to us, opening his arms laden with grace."¹⁷ God's grace is bestowed upon us copiously in prayer and the sacraments. And if it should be lost by grave sin, it can be recovered in the sacrament of penance.¹⁸

One of the hymns in the Liturgy of the Hours reads: "Lord, by the dew of your grace, heal the wounds of our ailing soul, so that, by suppressing evil desires, we may tearfully deplore our sins."¹⁹ Grace heals the wounds of sin in our soul. It conforms our human will to the divine will through love for God, enlightens our intellect through faith, and orders the passions to our true end, subjecting them to reason. It is medicine for our whole being. In short: "There is nothing better in the world than to be in the grace of God."²⁰

Some people might ask themselves: "If God's grace is so powerful, why doesn't it have a more decisive effect on people?" Once again we encounter the mystery of human freedom. "Grace precedes, prepares and elicits our free response. It responds to the deep yearnings of human freedom, calls for its cooperation and leads freedom toward its perfection."²¹ But it does not force our freedom. "He who created you without you, will not save you without you,"²² Saint Augustine said. We may have access to a nuclear power plant and its thousands of megawatts, but our house has to be connected to the network if we are to get the energy we need for light, heat and other advantages. We need to open our hearts to grace with humility, thanksgiving and repentance for our sins, and strive with love to respond docilely to its promptings. And as Pope Francis assures us, we should never forget that "this battle is sweet, for it allows us to rejoice each time the Lord triumphs in our lives."²³ Thus we will avoid any trace of voluntarism, ever mindful of the absolute priority of grace in our life.

But it is also true that "in this life, human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace."²⁴ "Grace, precisely because it builds on nature, does not make us superhuman all at once. That kind of thinking would show too much confidence in our own abilities ... Unless we can acknowledge our concrete and limited situation, we will not be able to see the real and possible steps that the Lord demands of us at every moment, once we are attracted and empowered by his gift. Grace acts in history; ordinarily it takes hold of us and transforms us

¹⁶ Le Fort, G. Von, *The Veil of Veronica*, Cluny Media, Providence Rhode Island 2019.

¹⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 64.

¹⁸ Cf. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Church*, no. 310.

¹⁹ Latin Hymn of Vespers, Tuesday of the 25th Week of Ordinary Time.

²⁰ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 286.

²¹ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Church*, no. 425.

²² *Sermon* 169, 13.

²³ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate* (19 March 2018), no. 158.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 49.

progressively. If we reject this historical and progressive reality, we can actually refuse and block grace, even as we extol it by our words.”²⁵

God greatly respects our freedom. As Cardinal Ratzinger once said: “I think that we have really been able to see that God has entered into history in a much more gentle way, so to speak, than we would like. But also that this is his answer to freedom. And if we want God to respect freedom and approve of it when he does, then we must also learn to respect and love the gentleness of his action”²⁶ That is, we must love the gentleness of his grace.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 50.

²⁶ Ratzinger, Joseph, *Salt of the Earth*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1996, p. 220.