

# THE ROMAN CATHOLIC TRADITION AND PRAXIS REGARDING ORIGINAL SIN

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The 13<sup>th</sup> article of the *Gaudium et Spes* states the dogma of Original Sin according to the Roman-Catholic tradition, as follows:

## 13. SIN

Created by God in a state of justice, man, tempted by the devil, from the beginning of his history abused his freedom, setting himself against God and desiring to reach his goal outside God. Though knowing God, men did not give Him the expected honour due to God...but their foolish heart was darkened...and they preferred to serve the creature rather than the Creator. What comes to us by divine revelation is confirmed by experience. In fact, if man looks inside himself he finds himself inclined toward evil and deep in miseries that cannot derive from a good Creator. Often, refusing to acknowledge God as his principle, man has broken the right order in relation to his ultimate goal and, at the same time, all his orientation toward himself, other men and created things.

Therefore man finds himself split. This is why human life, both individual as well as collective, shows the marks of a dramatic struggle between good and evil, light and darkness. Even more, man finds himself unable to overcome evil's assaults in his own strength, and feels himself to be chained. But the Lord himself came to free man giving him the strength, renewing him from within, and banishing 'the prince of this world' (cf John 12:31), who enslaved him in sin. Sin, is, in effect, a loss for man himself, which hinders him from reaching his own fullness.

The sublime calling and the profound mercy experienced by men, find their own reason for existence in the light of this revelation.

This article summarises the essential elements constituting the doctrine of Original Sin, which is considered an 'abuse of freedom' and a demand, on man's part, to reach 'his goal outside God'. The dramatic consequences are 'idolatry' (serving the creature instead than the Creator), an inclination to evil and a wrong orientation toward himself and creation with the consequent loss of humanity. The final perspective remains the remedy brought by Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Revd Cereda was unable to attend the conference, but his paper was read by Revd Klaus Arnold.

This paper will summarise the general view of the *status questionis* of this article, pointing out similarities and diversities from the tradition that find a synthesis in the Holy See official documents. Finally, I will relate some of the present proposals of reformulation (not revision) of the dogma.

## **DOGMATIC FORMULATION**

The classic re-formulation of the doctrine of original sin was given in 1546, though once again in a controversial situation, at the Council of Trent. This formulation did not originate from nothing, and there were clear references to previous Councils, particularly to the ones in Carthage (418) and Orange (529).

The first of these Councils, Anti-Pelagian in character, closed with the condemnation of Pelagius' doctrine on death (which was not considered a consequence of sin but a natural condition) and on paedo-baptism, which was not considered a means for the forgiveness of sins. The dogmatic pronouncement reaffirmed that infant baptism was needed to free children from inherited sin through 'generation'. Canons 1 to 4 were also formulated. Echoing the two precedent councils, these confirmed that:

Can. 1. Adam, due to his transgression, lost his original holiness and justice meriting death and a worsening of his soul and body.

Can. 2. Original Sin is transmitted from Adam to his descendants with all its consequences.

Can. 3. Original Sin is transmitted through generation and not imitation. Against the Lutheran concept of forensic, extrinsic imputation, its intrinsic nature and the absolute necessity of Christ's salvation was confirmed.

Can. 4. Baptism is necessary to all, including children born into Christian families.

Canons 5 and 6, directed against Luther, were also drawn up. The first of these affirmed that baptism frees truly from sin while concupiscence still remains in the baptised not as sin, but as occasion to battle for good. Canon 6 served to clarify that what was affirmed about sin did apply to the Virgin Mary.

Because of the polemical climate in which it took place, the Council could not really calmly debate or reflect on the nature of original sin, which remained an open question.

After Trent, there were no important actions taken by the Magisterium. Neoscholastic theology maintained the Tridentine position, debating the issue mainly with regard the voluntariness of Original Sin.

## **STATUS QUESTIONIS**

In this last decade, the Original Sin debate has experienced a new interest. A fundamental theologian in rethinking the subject was Herbert Haag,<sup>2</sup> together with the Italian Maurizio Flick. In *Il Peccato Originale* Flick gives a brilliant exposition of the subject. He confirms that, until recently, before the Vatican II Council, the dogma on original sin had an undisputed position in the 'history of Salvation, between Creation and Incarnation'.<sup>3</sup> Adam's sin was considered a fundamental theological theme, traditionally taught together with the correlated principle of transmission by inheritance (with the specification 'by generation' or 'by origin and natural descent' or 'by birth'). There was common agreement on the concept of the loss of initial holiness, but little or nothing was said referring to its voluntariness. It was usually affirmed that, due to Adam's will, original sin passed, as guilt, on all. Infants' sin was also confirmed, without stressing the difference between the inherited sin and the later adults' sins, so that both were considered as part of a single generic concept with the only distinction that the 'originated sin' was not punished with the same gravity of personal sins.

Death and suffering were also included among the consequences of Original Sin, besides the darkening of the reason and the weakening of the will. Attempting to vindicate God, His unfulness in punishing mankind was maintained since '...original sin did not deprive us of anything which is strictly due, but only subtracts such gifts as He, in His freedom, would have given us, if Adam had not sinned'.<sup>4</sup>

Genesis 3 was read and interpreted in a literal and historical sense claiming to explain the present sinful situation of decadence and guilt. On Adam's account, humanity lost its familiarity with God, and its immunity from concupiscence and death. Romans 5:12-21 was considered the explicit revelation of original sin with its corollary of solidarity in punishment and guilt, being interpreted as if it dealt with sin's transmission. Augustine was considered the major author of the dogmatic definition on original sin, and the Council of Trent maintained its authority, having expressed the fundamental elements in line with Augustine that were still in vogue, that is:

1. Original Sin originates from an original action
2. Originated Sin implies the loss of original sanctity and justice.  
Forgiveness comes only through Jesus Christ in baptism.
3. Originated Sin is suppressed in baptism.

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<sup>2</sup> Haag, Herbert, *Dottrina biblica della creazione e dottrina ecclesiastica del peccato originale*, Queriniana.

<sup>3</sup> Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia, a cura di Giuseppe Barbaglio e Severino Dianich, ed. Paoline, 1979, 1131.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

From the 1960's new forms of rethinking the argument arose. While yet in line with Augustinian thought, the attempt was made to explain his system better. It was clarified that at the Council of Trent original sin was not completely identified with concupiscence, and no positive definition of its nature was given, leaving ample space for theological debate.

New proposals arose regarding the voluntariness of sin in Adam's descendants; the explanation given was that since Adam had been constituted juridical head of humanity, due to his sin all his descendants became sinners. Others proposed alternative solutions affirming that, because of the loss of supernatural gifts, everyone is incapable of living in holiness and, therefore, condemned to sinning. Social or genetic transmission theories were condemned. The principle was also maintained that Original Sin had not completely corrupted human nature but only wounded it in such a way that, though deprived of God's gifts, it still enjoys the divine assistance.

In any case, new challenges compelled the Church to undergo a more serious reconsideration :

1. *Evolutionism* undoubtedly posed serious questions to the classical definition of Original Sin. The major question was: ' How could subjects in a primitive stage of evolution, with an insufficient psychic development, commit such a sin as to involve all their descendants? The classical answer was unsatisfactory.
2. *Personalism* with its weight of individual responsibility and of personal dignity and autonomy, refused to accept the principle of a punishment for other's sins. If this were the case, it was said, God would no longer be a God of justice but of injustice.
3. *Modern biblical hermeneutic* contributed greatly to the dismantling of a concept of original sin which gave rise to more problems than solutions. The use of the critical-historical method of interpreting the Bible, from the Vatican II Council on, led to the recognition that the first chapters of Genesis are not a report of what really happened at the beginning of the world and that this writing belongs to the genre of Wisdom or aetiological literature *a posteriori*. The aim was not to define the human condition *a priori*, but to reach the conclusion that man cannot save himself and that his condition is afflicted by an inborn evil.

Besides the two theologians already mentioned, Piet Schoonenberg is another great contributor to the movement of rethinking original sin. In his *De Macht der Zonde*, after summarising the biblical data that go beyond the episodes of Adam and Eve and Romans 5, and after having analysed the conciliar documents (Carthage, 411, 418 and Orange, 529), he underlined the fact that at Trent nothing was imposed in terms of sin's transmission (*propagatione non imitatione transfusum*—procreation vs imitation was the kernel of the debate), of infant

sinfulness (i.e., the relation between original and personal sinning), and of monogenism vs polygenism (the final formula stressed the difficulty of reconciling Polygenism with original sin without excluding the possibility).

Summarising the classical thought, Schoonenberg proposed to compare it with the new historical, scientific and theological positions concluding that, ‘...it is right to demonstrate that the classical doctrine, though not intrinsically modified, could be completed and rendered more real, taking into consideration the sin of the world’.<sup>5</sup>

In its classical statement, in fact, the doctrine of original sin remained detached from the history of grace. Little attention was paid to the universal saving will of God which should be the real starting point of any definition of sin. Two attempts to fill the gap were developed,<sup>6</sup> built around two differing orientations: the *conditionalist* and the *actualist*. The first affirms that original sin is inherited before any personal choice, as a historical condition which, nevertheless, respects personal freedom; the second underlines the existential aspect and freedom of choice.

At the source of this rethinking there is a new way of reading the biblical data, which moves from *originating sin* to the *originated sin*. Human reality, in its dynamism, becomes the key to understanding our relationship with God and, from a static and impersonal position we come to a dynamic relation. ‘Sin and its coming into the world does not appear limited to an initial moment but stretches along history as a power that wants to draw reality in its entirety to itself’.<sup>7</sup> Christology reclaims a central position in evaluating the biblical data and, instead of a ‘first Adam’, the starting point becomes ‘the second Adam’. Original sin is no longer considered in a legalistic way, as breaking the law or a commandment, but as the fracturing of a relationship, a refusal of love. *Originated original sin* is considered to be the distance and separation from God. The *originating original sin* would be very similar to the other, with an existential difference caused by the condition and time of its happening.

At the present, theological reflection tries, therefore, to underline God’s project in Christ for man—that is, sanctification by the Spirit—without neglecting the actual historical reality of man’s distance from God which leads to an inner disorder and division which can be defined as ‘sin’. These two dynamics do not have the same weight and caution needs to be taken to avoid, on the one hand, a form of dualism which sees humanity as naturally independent from God (falling into a kind of neo-pelagianism) and, on the other side, an impersonal and

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<sup>5</sup> Schoonenberg P, *Der Macht der Zonde*, (L C G Malmberg, S’-Hertogenbosch, 1962), Italian translation, *La potenza del peccato* (Queriniana, Brescia, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Colzani, G. *Antropologia teologica*, (EDB, Bologna 1992), 380ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 381.

irresponsible definition of sin. As Colzani affirms, ‘the problem of personal guilt in original sin should not be credited to generation, to birth, but needs to be thought through again’.<sup>8</sup>

This change of perspective is of no little value and, in line with the christocentric turn of the Vatican II Council, opens extraordinary new ways of thinking, for example, regarding infant baptism<sup>9</sup> and the ecumenical dialogue.

## PROPOSALS

A great contribution to the theological debate comes from *the Minutes of Congresses*, the last one on the theme being the fifth refresher course for Dogmatic Theology teachers held in Rome, 2-4 January, 1995. In it, besides establishing the Old and New Testament data at the foundation of Church reflection, the thought of Augustine was reconsidered in the light of the contributions given by depth and relational-humanistic psychology, favouring the relational over the ontological aspect.

This led to the formulation of useful proposals for better presentations of the theme at both doctrinal and pastoral-catechetical levels. Sharing this position, Colzani stresses the fact that ‘the issue concerning sin and original sin cannot be viewed as a regional debate but only within a unitary Christian anthropology’.<sup>10</sup> Sin, in fact, is something that touches the primacy of God and our relationship to God; it is not only a problem of freedom. Further, the solution to the problem resides in God’s Grace, so becoming more a theological than an ethical problem.

Thanks to the exegetical work done by Westermann and Alonso-Schökel on the first chapters of Genesis, Catholic theology was obliged to abandon the centrality of Adamic and paradisiac themes in the comprehension of original sin, showing a new interest in the concepts of sin’s solidarity and sin’s structures. Distance from God’s justice is no longer found in the condition of the unbaptised child but in the ‘globality of a dynamic history of humanity’,<sup>11</sup> so that ‘human sinfulness is a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 383.

<sup>9</sup> Ladaria, Luis, *Antropologia teologica*, Edizioni Piemme, (Casale Monferrato, 1986). In this respect, the author affirms, ‘The problem untouched by Trent regarded the “disposition” by which man receives the sacrament, the faith by which he accepts grace. From this standpoint...we may think that, without detracting anything from the insertion of man to Christ, through baptism, by a sincere choice toward the good and by a true conversion, the acceptance of this grace might not be total, complete. In this case, a remnant of “sin” remains in the baptisand. The insertion in Christ does not in all cases eliminate all evil’s mediations at the root and in such a case we could not speak of a total disappearance of the mediation toward good in those baptised. This happens not because baptism does not have enough strength to insert fully in Christ eliminating the effects of the mediation of grace, nor because this baptismal grace does not transform us fully; the reason is that the answer of faith will hardly be such that the insertion and elimination of evil will be perfectly obtained’ (201-202).

<sup>10</sup> *Questioni sul Peccato Originale* a cura di I Sanna, edizioni Messaggero Padova, Messaggero di S Antonio editrice, (Padova, 1996), 220.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 222.

responsible opposition to Christ...read according to the cultural urges of our time. The Magisterial determinations, in fact, stress only the loss of the holy state and justice, and the death of the soul (DS 1512): practically, they confirm the fact of sin but do not explain its nature. This is the reason for returning to the cultural data to give a more precise content to sin's universal solidarity.'<sup>12</sup>

Positions differ, and there are those who give more value to the social dimension recurring in the notion of the world's sin (see Schoonenberg), where the concepts of evil's solidarity and of sin's structures are underlined as the conditioning factors in the life of the single individual. There are also those who, following Personalism, suggest a tie with God in terms of the fundamental and structural relationship of the personal being, so that sin becomes a choice of autonomy and independence from God. Dialogue with psychoanalysis suggests, to others, the recurrence of the concept of *fundamental guilt* rather than *sin*, so avoiding the appeal to an archetype image of little present relevance.

The situation is complex and productive but, inevitably, dangerous. In fact, the risk is of going too far in posing doubts on Church tradition, or detaching completely from any tie with history, and reducing the value of Christ's salvation. There are, therefore, those who insist we put the stress on the *originated original sin* and not on the *originating one*.

G. Colombo seems to find the right balance with his statement that Christ is, in reality, theologically antecedent to Adam, though following him chronologically. For this reason, he says, 'in effect, it is that Adam, created in Christ and existing in Him, who commits sin. The antecedence of solidarity with Christ is fundamental: it frees our theme from an excessive Augustinian debt which, on the one hand, overvalues Adam's sin as the root of all evil's history and, on the other hand, reduces predestination to include only the elect.'<sup>13</sup>

Christ's primacy *is* proposed as the stronghold of the doctrine of sin in order to avoid falling into a form of humanism that considers God's grace as 'something' extra added to an already existing structure. The renewed emphasis on Christ speaks of predestination for all mankind to be recreated in 'His image' safeguarding that freedom which is not absolute self-determination but, according to the biblical concept, relational and conditioned by being in Christ, true example and author of our freedom. This does not mean that human freedom is not a split freedom, conditioned and autonomous. Therefore, 'the one who exists only within relationship with God, is historically the one who refuses Him'. And in this we find not symbols but something definite and real that opposes Christ. Original sin lives in single acts of sin as expressions of our bewildered freedom which fails to recognise God as its ultimate goal. This inner conflict resembles

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 226.

something that happened at a certain specific time and that belongs to history. 'This shaking of saving solidarity with Christ is original sin.'<sup>14</sup>

This new comprehension of original sin signals an irrestrainable progress. P. Giannoni confirms this, saying that '...it seems certain that it is impossible to continue with the formal proposition of the recent past, changing only few parts'.<sup>15</sup> The cultural situation and theological biblical progress have undergone such developments that a new formulation is not only desired but also needed. Giacomo Panteghini adds that belief in original sin '...has not yet found a satisfying conceptualisation. The Augustinian formulation is problematic due to the fading of the cultural horizon in which it grew. New formulations are still uncertain and lack an explicit endorsement by the Magisterium. The dogma of original sin aims only to tell us that, without Christ, humanity is deprived of salvation, in divergence from the divine plan'.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The doctrine of original sin in the Roman Catholic Church offers points of development for thinking along three specific lines of thought:

### **Mysteric and Theological Conception**

The treatment of the theme should be considered from an hamartological perspective, within a theological framework capable of *detecting its mysteric reality over and above the ethical one*, as an anthropological reality before God and in His name.

### **Theological Concentration**

While it is evident that there will be a certain amount of secularisation as the theme is interpreted according to various horizons of thought, in theology we should adopt a theological concentration since we can talk *about sin only before God*.

### **Christological Theme**

Christology should be the appropriate ground of treatment of the theme. This chapter of theological anthropology should find its valid definition with the related areas of *soteriology* and *christology*.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 228. Just an additional note: In this new perspective, what value is given to infant baptism? Besides its introductory value to the church community, it is considered in a christocentric sense to be a return to Christ the Saviour who realises His victory over sin right at baptism (DS 1513). Consequently, concupiscence or death itself, which remain in the baptised, are no longer sin but 'become the sphere of new life, the space of a freedom vitalised by the Spirit of the Resurrected' (229).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>16</sup> Panteghini, Giacomo, *L'uomo alla luce di Cristo*, edizioni Messaggero (Padova, 1990), 159.