

Original Sin

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned... For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. ~ Romans 5:12, 19

The Fall

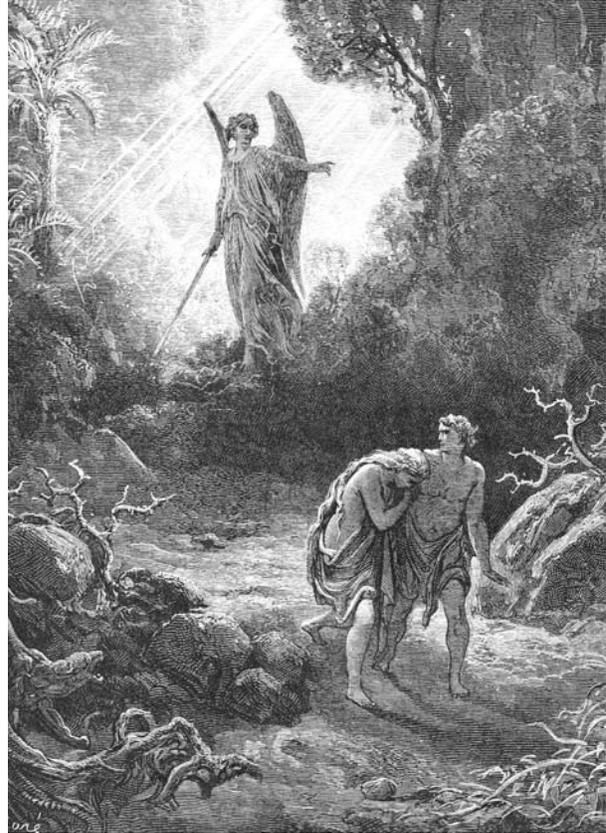
MAN AND WOMAN were created in a state of natural friendship with God. They were at one not only with God but also in themselves, with one another as well, and with the entire created world. They were also free — free of the tendency to sin and free to choose the good. They had complete self-mastery. As the story of Genesis narrates, God put this freedom to the test when he allowed the devil in the form of a serpent to tempt them — with lies and half-truths that they believed. In their pride and lack of trust that God had their best interests at heart, through the misuse of their freedom, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command.

Consequences of the Fall

By disobeying God, our first parents destroyed the original state of friendship in which they had been created. They were cut off from the presence of God, driven out of the Garden of Eden, and barred from returning (see Gn 3:23-24). They changed physically and spiritually. The original harmony they had enjoyed with creation was destroyed, and the original unity between them was now subject to tension and futility, "marked," as the *Catechism* explains, "by lust and domination"¹ (CCC 400). This lost friendship was a death of the spiritual life of the soul, and brought with it physical death: "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gn 3:19).

When Adam and Eve lost their state of original justice and holiness, they lost this natural state for their descendants as well. From this moment forward, sin and death inundated the whole of creation, as Sacred Scripture tells us: "God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it" (Wis 2:23-24). The fallen human nature is a state of being deprived of the original justice and holiness that our first par-

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The Expulsion from the Garden, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

ents enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. Human nature is now wounded by sin, warring with itself. St. Paul writes with acute self-knowledge of this miserable state of affairs: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:15, 17-19).

Original sin affects everyone; it is the state into which we are all born. Every individual is born without God's life. This does not mean we are

¹ Cf. Genesis 3: 7-16

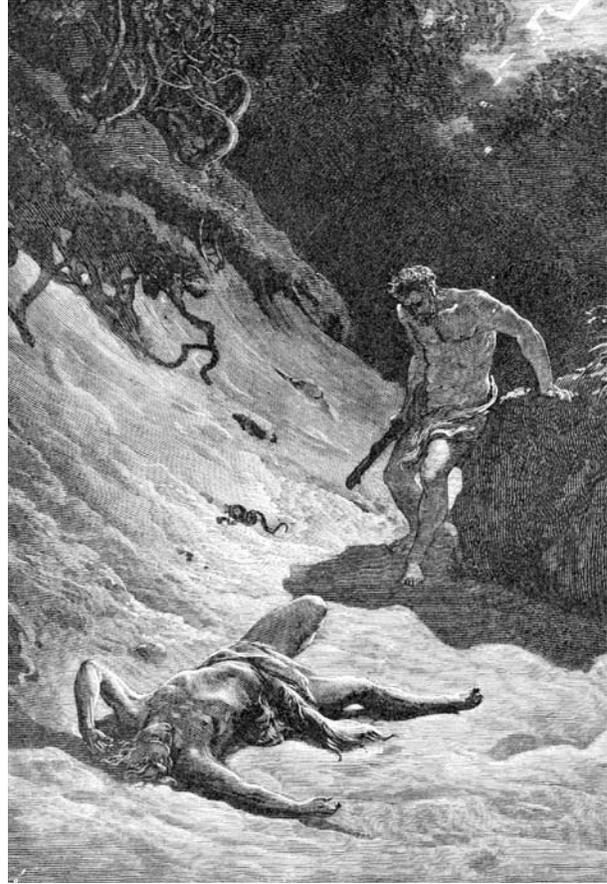
guilty of personal sin, but that we are born with a wounded, although not wholly corrupted, human nature.

Our wounded human nature is characterized by a darkened intellect (we no longer understand or reason perfectly), a weakened will (we have difficulty resisting temptations to sin), and disordered desires that incline us toward sin rather than toward God. The human mind has been made for truth, but because of sin it is not always able to see the truth. Likewise, the human will has been made for goodness, but because of sin it is pulled toward doing evil. Our bodily desires, in themselves good, because of sin are often not properly ordered toward our true good. This inclination to evil is traditionally called “concupiscence” (From a Latin word meaning “to long for or desire”). Christian Tradition has given this word its particularly negative meaning of “those desires and longings of the body which are contrary to the good perceived in the mind.” Human weaknesses are not sinful in themselves, but without God’s grace we are prone to sin. In sum, human existence wounded by sin can be deeply frustrating, as St. Paul makes abundantly clear (see also below).

God Rescues and Saves Us

From this fallen state, we need a rescuer and redeemer. Without God’s life, the soul is spiritually dead and, alone, we cannot always separate truth from falsehood and are too weak to withstand our inclination to evil and our disordered desires. Even as God was meting out just punishment to Adam and Eve, he promised them a savior (see Gn 3:15). God has willed that the obedience and righteousness of his only-begotten Son made man, Jesus Christ the new Adam, undo the first Adam’s sin and be the source of our justification and sanctification. It is only through Christ’s redemptive actions that we can receive the grace to heal the wounds that incline us to sin.

The sacrament of Baptism restores life to the soul by wiping away original sin. This is why the Church baptizes infants who, although not guilty of personal sin, still need the cleansing effects of Baptism. However, Baptism does not take away this disordered inclination toward sin. Why would God allow our human nature to remain wounded? He could have taken away the consequences of the sin of our first parents, and of the sins of us their descendants. But if he had done this, he would have robbed us of our human dignity and freedom. Choice without



The Murder of Abel by Cain, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

consequences is just as if our actions have no importance to God, and choice with no importance is meaningless freedom, since nothing real results. If we are to freely love God, we must be free to turn from him as well; the choice for good and for evil both must have meaning.

With the help of God’s grace, each individual can overcome sin and live as a child of God (see Gal 4:5-7), as one who is a fellow heir with Christ (see Rom 8:17). This does not occur without struggle, and Scripture characterizes this struggle as a war against the flesh: *“For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* (Rom 7:22-25). This struggle enables us to value salvation and makes us surrender more completely to Christ, who alone has the power to deliver us.

(CCC 374-377, 379, 388-390, 396-409, 1263-1264, 1426, 2514-2516)

“Without God’s grace we are prone to sin.”