

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HUMAN CONDITION

(Catechism nn. 355-421)

Created by God

The Catechism (n. 355-421) concludes its reflections on God the Creator by focusing on the human race and on the condition in which we find ourselves. Genesis contains two accounts of the creation of human beings. One account presents human beings as a mixture of dust and divine spirit:

‘God shaped humanity [*’adam*] from the dust of the soil [*’adamah*] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human being became a living being’ (Genesis 2:7).

The other account speaks of human beings as made in God’s image (see Catechism n.355):

‘God said: Let us make human beings [*’adam*] in our own image and likeness ... And God created human beings in his image ... male and female he created them. And God blessed them and said to them: Be fruitful and increase and fill the earth and make it subject to you ... and it was so! (Genesis 1:26-30).

Scholars offer a range of suggestions as to what it means to be ‘in God’s image and likeness’. There is the fact that human beings are able to be in communion with God; that we are able, like God, to give ourselves in love to others; that, as male and female, we are able to be God’s instruments in giving life to others who can communicate with God; and that we are able to be God’s instruments in carrying on God’s creating action of bringing order out of chaos.

However, for all its inspired beauty, the portrayal of human beings offered to us in the Book of Genesis is necessarily imperfect. Those who experienced Jesus tell us to look at him if we want to see how God wants human beings to be (see Catechism n. 411). Paul writes: ‘Adam is a type of the one who was to come’(Romans 5:14). ‘The first human being, Adam, became a ‘living being’(Genesis 2:7); the last Adam [Jesus] became a life-giving Spirit’(1Corinthians 15:45).

Original Sin

Life as we experience it is far from perfect. How God intends us to be, how we are as we come from God’s hands, is one thing. How we find ourselves to be is another. The difference is brought about by what we call sin (Catechism n. 374-421). There is personal sin, when we choose to act in ways that we know to be harmful, to others and to ourselves. We will have more to say on the subject of personal sin in Chapter 16. Here we will restrict our comments to ‘Original Sin’ which refers to the influences that incline us to personal sin, influences that we have inherited from our ‘origins’.

The discovery of the library of Ashurbanipal of Niniveh in 1853, the publication in 1876 of the Chaldean account of the primeval myths, and the discoveries at Ugarit in the 1920’s, have helped us see that, in presenting the primeval narratives, the inspired author of Genesis 2:4 to 4:26 is selecting from common Semitic mythology and reshaping the material to highlight the theological perspective that he wishes to establish for his work. He does this in order to link what is common to mankind to the traditions of Israel, and also as a reminder to the king of the foundations of his rule, thus providing a critique of the king’s way of exercising his reign.

The Catechism's treatment of the Fall and Original Sin is among its least satisfactory sections. In *'The New Catechism: analysis and commentary'* published by the Catholic Institute of Sydney (1994), Father Joseph Sobb SJ quotes n. 390 of the Catechism:

'The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place in the beginning of the history of man. It may be more accurate, and more authentically in keeping with the literary form, to say that this narrative is affirming a primeval truth about humanity, rather than describing a primeval event'(page 92).

On page 20 of the same book, Father David Coffey, speaking more generally of the Catechism, writes:

'It is not difficult to identify the mentality of the Catechism: it is that of the Latin Roman theology manuals of the 1950's, complete with their tendency to integralism, their lack of historical awareness, and their hermeneutical naivety.'

The Catechism's treatment of the Fall is an example of this last tendency.

In the first eleven chapters, the author of Genesis is not recording history prior to Abraham. He is looking beyond history to assert what is the unchangeable reality that underlies the history that begins with the stories of the patriarchs (Genesis 12-50). He is interested in his present reality, and in what it means to be human, caught between sin and the constant reality of God's relationship to us and our relationship to God. As we read the narrative of the sin of our origins ('Original Sin') the correct question is not 'What is the meaning of these past events to us today?' but 'What is the inspired author saying about the human condition?'

He wants to bring out the limits within which he and his contemporaries must live. If they do not, like those who have gone before them they will suffer the consequences of a breakdown of law and order. He wants to show that we can learn from the mistakes of our ancestors. YHWH is the God who hears the cry of the poor. Because of the mercy of God, the effects of our sin – seen as punishment by the author of Genesis – can lead us to a change of behaviour and to find forgiveness and new life. However, we cannot go on sinning without suffering sin's consequences.

Though the author borrows from Semitic mythology, he is not interested in myth or its cultic expression. Rather, he is interested in history, and therefore in human behaviour and responsible action, here formalised in a description of the human-being-as-such ('*adam*'), and the various basic relationships within which we work out our lives. Not all our inclinations are towards good (Genesis 8:21) but YHWH is intimately involved in human history and divine mercy transcends our sin.

In Genesis 2:4-25 and 3:1-24 he speaks of the paradox of being human: the dust and the spirit, the sanctity and the sin, the wonder and the limitations that we all experience. This is followed by a section (Genesis 4:1-26) in which he reflects on the disharmony that we humans experience, the pain, the sweated labour, and the experience of the absence of God, of suffering and of guilt – all the results of human disobedience, of our failure to listen to the inspiration of God's Spirit.

The ambiguity of being human

The description of paradise is a poetic statement of what God wants for us human beings, and of what the world would be if we did not sin (contrast Catechism n. 374ff). The tree of life is a symbol of immortality. According to the myth, if we could eat the fruit of this tree – something that Adam and Eve do not do – we would live forever. The other tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, symbolizes wisdom. We fancy that if we could eat of this tree we would be able to decide for ourselves what is good and evil. Adam and Eve reach up and grasp the fruit, only to find that their failure to depend on God leads to a breakdown of harmony. For true wisdom can be received only from God, who knows what is good for us, and who warns us that certain kinds of behaviour are destructive:

‘YHWH God commanded mankind [*’adam*]: “From all the trees of the garden you may eat, but you may not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it you will die” (Genesis 2:16-17).

We are told that the only life we have is one we receive from Love, and that if we choose not to obey God, if we think that we can decide for ourselves what is good for us or harmful for us, we will throw away our lives.

Tragically, we fail to listen, and we give in to desire that is not in accordance with our deepest needs as creatures:

‘Now the snake was the most shrewd [*’arum*] of all the living things of the field that YHWH God had made. It asked the woman, ‘Did God really say that you were not to eat from any of the trees of the garden? ... You will not die. God knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be as gods, knowing good and evil ... And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat from and pleasant to look at, and desirable so as to become clever. So she took some of its fruit and ate, and she gave it to her husband and he ate. And the eyes of both were opened, and they realised that they were naked [*’arom*]’ (Genesis 3:1,4,6-7).

To listen to the serpent is to listen to that part of us that belongs to the dust. What we should be doing is listen to that part of us that is breathed into us from God – the Spirit. To follow the serpent is to follow our desires without discernment. Man and woman reach up to grasp the fruit. We want to be like God. This is exactly what God wants for us, but we can be ‘like God’ only if we wait for and welcome God’s grace. Jesus shows us this:

‘Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave’ (Philippians 2:5-7).

The author of Genesis goes on to reflect on elements of the human condition, portraying them as the consequence of sin, the abuse of our God-given freedom, our wanting to be independent. The most radical effect of sin is death – not in the sense of being mortal, for the couple did not eat the fruit of the tree of life – but in the radical sense of being separated from God, the source of life. Prior to any awareness of an afterlife, physical death was understood as involving a final separation from the divine Spirit. It is understandable, therefore, that physical death was sometimes caught up in this thinking and was thought of as punishment for sin.

The author speaks also of the struggle between some of the animal and human world and of the struggle we experience in caring for the soil and gaining a living from it. He speaks of our inability to directly experience God, and of our relationship with God as ambivalent. Furthermore, all is not right between the sexes, and, having broken communion with God, we humans break the communion we have with each other. There is violence between the farmers (Cain) and the pastoralists (Abel). Violence would lead to the destruction of God's creation were it not for those, like Noah, who welcome God's grace.

The 'Fall'

Describing the actual human condition as a 'Fall' assumes that there was a time before sin when human experience was different from what it is now. The Genesis story, however, is not a description of two different historical conditions. It is a theological narrative. It is viewing reality from an inspired perspective. Rather than see it as 'once in time' we should read 'once upon a time'. It is meta-historical, affirming the way things should be and would be without disobedience. Actual historical experience is that in fact we all do sin, and so things are the way they are.

The idea of the 'Fall' stems from late Jewish speculation:

'O Adam what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone but ours also who are your descendants' (2 Esdras 7:118).

'Do not court death by the errors of your ways,
nor invite destruction through your own actions.

Death was not God's doing, he takes no pleasure in the extinction of the living.
To be – for this he created all;

the world's created things have health in them, in them no fatal poison can be found,
and Hades holds no power on earth; for virtue is undying' (Wisdom 1:12-15).

'It was the devil's envy that brought death into the world' (Wisdom 2:24).

'All sin has come into creation through me' (Eve is talking: Apocalypse of Moses, 32).

'Each of us has been the Adam to his own soul' (2 Apocalypse of Baruch 54:19).

'Adam brought death into the world' (Deut R. 9. 206a).

The Genesis narrative is a brilliant portrayal of the tension, the paradox, of being human. There is the pull of the divine, inviting man and woman into dialogue, into possibility, freedom, responsibility, community and transcendence. There is also the pull of the *'adâmâh*, which they share with other living creatures (including the serpent). It is experienced as an attraction to a world without discretion, without choice, without freedom, without dialogue, without community.

The dogma of 'Original Sin' is one of the most complex teachings of our faith. Without excusing personal sin, it is essentially a reminder of the limits placed on human freedom by what we inherit and by the environment within which we happen to live.

I offer eleven propositions for further reflection. They attempt to tease out the key implications of this teaching.

Original Sin

1. We experience a lack of harmony in our feelings, impulses, desires and actions. Some of this is because of the sins we ourselves have committed. Some is because of our 'origins'. Our human experience has been enriched by what we have inherited from our forebears and from the environment within which we live our lives. We have also been harmed by the sins of our forebears, as has the environment within which we have to live our lives.
2. As part of the animal world we have inherited the instincts that are for the survival and defence of our species and our person. It is these instincts that account for much of the fear, the fight and flight responses, and the violence that continue to characterise human behaviour, behaviour that we speak of as 'sin'. In evolutionary terms it is not this instinctual behaviour that needs explaining. Rather, it is the human capacity for altruism, for caring for others when there is no obvious advantage for oneself, for empathy, sympathy and compassion.
3. God is drawing everyone to experience the fullness of life that consists in communion in love with God and so with the whole of creation.
4. We experience a tension between what we might call the 'gravity of grace' drawing us into divine communion and the self-centredness, even self-absorption that inclines us to sin.
5. I can affect the environment, but the 'I' that can affect it is affected by it. We are dependent on our environment. It can enrich us, but it can also impoverish us. So-called 'Original Sin' varies in kind and degree from one person to another.
6. The whole weight of personal sin, therefore, cannot be attributed to the person who sins. Circumstances can diminish freedom and therefore responsibility.
7. Healing ('salvation') requires grace from God. We are involved in a drama, not only of discovery, but of redemption. Redemption comes from within, brought about by God's grace enabling and perfecting our faith, hope and love. Everything is gift: my being, my freedom, and redemption which lifts me to communion with God, a communion which is the perfection of finite being (including the forgiveness of sin). We are made for love, for divine love. It is offered as a gift, and we must embrace it.
8. Obviously, this saving grace does not remove us from our environment, but it does open us to the possibility of healing and growing into innocence – not 'naturally' by our own efforts, but because of the love of Jesus who gives us his Spirit.
9. It is our graced nature that can achieve concord, but not without a struggle. Saint Augustine likens us to the wounded man in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The baptised are convalescing in the inn of the Church.
10. Freedom, therefore, does not mean independence. Rather, it means the graced ability to open ourselves with our whole mind and heart to God's healing love, upon which we are utterly dependent, and which, thanks to Jesus, we know is surely being offered.
11. We must accept real, though limited, responsibility for the way we have chosen to respond to the opportunities offered to us, and we must welcome our dependence on the Spirit of God that is sustaining us in existence and drawing us into ever more intimate communion with God and so with creation.

In the Newer Testament, Paul looks at our common human condition, and contrasts this with the life – the communion with God – effected by Jesus and offered to all:

‘As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive’(1Corinthians 15:22).

‘As sin came into the world through one person, and death through sin, and so death spread to all because all sinned ... much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one person Jesus Christ overflowed beyond measure for the many’(Romans 5:12, 15).

The Catechism (n. 294) quotes Irenaeus:

‘God’s glory is a human being who is fully alive, and full human living is to see God’(Against the Heresies 4.20.7).

To see what we are meant to be we must look at Jesus. To live to the full what it is to be human we must welcome the grace offered to us through Jesus. In communion with him and sharing his life we are able to look to God our Creator and, with Jesus, call God ‘Abba! Father!’

