Original Sin (I)

by Timothy McDermott, O.P.

The story of original sin is a story told us by God through Christian tradition. As in all stories which make a point, some elements in this story are absolutely essential to its point, others belong rather to the particular style in which the story is told (and possibly another style might be equally effective), while other elements again are essential neither to point nor to style but included simply because that was the way an incident happened. But how do we decide which elements are which?

In this article I shall suggest that the essential elements in the doctrine of original sin make a point about Calvary; that the references to Adam and the origins of mankind are part only of the style in which this point about Calvary is communicated; and that it is the gospels rather than Genesis which describe the way original sin actually happened. But how does one test such suggestions?

By examining the only vehicle of the doctrine that we have: namely, the traditional interpretation; and trying to discover *within that interpretation* the story-teller's point, the structure of his story and the importance of its various elements. So in what follows I shall first consider what the Council of Trent and Thomas Aquinas have to say about original sin, without questioning their presuppositions, in the hope that the purpose, structure and relative importance of the various elements of this interpretation will emerge. Only then will I try to explore the possibility of re-telling the story in a different form.

The Genesis story

The story of Adam and Eve in Genesis tells how that couple initially lived in the garden of paradise, naked and unashamed, close by the tree of life from which they might have eaten and lived for ever. But because they went astray from God they fell from this paradisal state, became ashamed of their nakedness, were deprived of the tree of life, and began to suffer toil, contention and death.

Until recently biblical exegesis has taken this story more or less literally, as, for example, in the precise formulation given to it by the Council of Trent:

> If anyone refuses to acknowledge that Adam, the first man, upon violating God's command in the garden, immediately lost that holiness and uprightness (*iustitia*) in which he had been established; incurred God's anger, and therefore death and slavery to

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> the devil; and was totally changed for the worse in both body and soul: let him be anathema.
> (Decree on Original Sin, paragraph 1. *Denzinger-Schönmetzer* 1511)

In saying that death and human weakness are consequences of a primal fall, the tradition does not necessarily mean to imply that death and weakness are foreign to human nature as such; rather, in a very important sense, it can be implying that such defects are natural. Aquinas, for example, recognizes that such defects are necessary consequences of being material. Material things cannot last for ever; the senses necessarily seek what delights those senses rather than what appeals to reason; and a mind which depends for knowledge on experience will always find access to truth laborious. But the naturalness of these defects does not prevent them also being the penalties of original sin. For it may be that original sin has precisely abandoned us to the very defects of nature itself which God has been helping men to overcome.

Thus, Adam was made from the dust of the earth; and yet in paradise he would have lived for ever, not because of some intrinsic immortality granted by God to his body, but because of a rightness granted to his mind and will whereby he could control his mortal body and plan its preservation. When of his own fault Adam lost this grace for himself and his descendants, and plunged man into the defects of his nature, such defects ceased to be merely natural, and became also penalties for Adam's fault.

> These defects are passed on to every man when he receives his nature, since human nature is now bereft of the gracious help which was conferred on it in the first parent and was to be transmitted with it to his progeny. And since this bereavement was the result of a voluntary sin, the consequent effect is culpable. Such defects are therefore *culpable* in relation to their first source in Adam's sin, and *natural* in relation to the now bereft nature.
> (*Contra Gentes* 4.52)

To use a simile from Aquinas himself: to the darkness in man God offered light. But Adam's sin raised an obstacle to this light and plunged man in darkness. But now this darkness is no longer simply darkness: it is a shadow.

The tradition might have rested at this point if it had only had the Genesis story to consider. But more was necessary in order to do justice to the New Testament as well. For as far as the interpretation has gone up to this point, and as far perhaps as the Old Testament goes, one could legitimately say that all men live in *shadow* due to sin; but it would hardly be proper language to say they all live in *sin*. For the shadow cannot be blamed on the whole human race as such, but only on the individual perpetrator of the personal sin which has plunged the world in shadow. Yet the New Testament demands more. For the story of Christ's redemption is presented to us in the New Testament not simply as a rescue of men from the *effects* of the

personal sin of Adam but as the redemption of all mankind from their own universal guilt.

The New Testament data

The teaching that Christ is our only way of salvation implies that without Christ all men would be liable to eternal damnation; and this can only justly be so if all men are somehow guilty of sin. For this reason the Council of Trent pronounces:

> If anyone asserts that Adam . . . though befouled himself by the sin of disobedience, transmitted no sin to the whole human race, but only death and bodily penalties: let him be anathema.
> (*loc. cit.*, paragraph 2, D.-S. 1512)

Mankind not only suffers the effects of sin, but shares in the sin itself.

And this, the custom of infant baptism assures us, must be true even of men who have not themselves committed sinful actions. For babies have not personally sinned, yet need to be baptized (or whatever other grace God may give them when baptism is impossible). So there must be some other kind of sin, some sin that you incur simply by being born a man, some sin which you do not bring on yourself but which you share in by becoming a member of the race, some sin that arises not from an action of yours but from your origin.[1]

Hence the statement of the Council of Trent:

> If anyone denies that newborn infants need baptism, even those born from baptized parents, or says that although baptized 'in remission of sins' they carry from Adam nothing of original sin which needs to be atoned for in the waters of rebirth before they can enter everlasting life (from which it would follow that in them the baptism formula 'in remission of sins' is not true but false): let him be anathema. . . . For by reason of the rule of faith handed down from the apostles, even infants who have not as yet been able to commit sins themselves are truly baptized 'in remission of sins', in order to be cleansed through rebirth from what they incurred through birth. (*loc. cit.*, paragraph 4; D.-S. 1514)

It would not, of course, be in accordance with the tradition to interpret this guilt of original sin as a personal guilt. Babies have no personal guilt; they are born into a situation. If they die in this situation (which we know they will not if they are baptized, but simply do not know anything definite about if they are not baptized), they do not enter into heaven. But the situation is not something they can be reproached with personally. Nevertheless, it is certainly not sufficient to think of this situation simply as an effect of another's

[1]Notice that the significance of the term 'original' sin is not primarily sin 'started on its way at mankind's origin', but rather sin 'transmitted to each individual at his or her origin'. *Originale*, for Aquinas, means *per originem*, not *ab origine*.

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personal sin. The tradition is clear that, although the situation cannot be described as personal sin or personally guilty, it can nevertheless be properly described as 'sin' and as 'guilty'. Original sin is therefore more than the situation we have called the 'shadow on the world'.

It is the New Testament which has insisted on this element by the way it conceives of Christ's redemption. It is the New Testament, therefore, which sets us the essential problem: that of a non-personal sin inherited from another. As sin it involves the notion of blameworthiness, yet not blameworthiness of the person. No interpretation which obscures this point can be accepted as faithful to the tradition.

The traditional theology

It is upon this point therefore that we shall concentrate. For no amount of reinterpretation about what the effects of original sin are, or how we are embroiled in a situation of misery and failure due to sin, will finally be of value unless it can explain in what proper sense of the word this situation is itself sin.

Now clearly one could reproduce Adam's sin by voluntarily imitating or repeating in oneself his personal evil intention. But how can sin be reproduced simply be being born, which is not voluntary and which therefore cannot reproduce this personal intention?

> Granted that certain bodily defects can be transmitted from parent to child by way of origin, and consequently even certain defects of soul due to the body's unfitness (as when idiots sometimes give birth to idiots), nevertheless the very concept of *inheriting* such a defect seems to exclude the idea of guilt, which must by definition be voluntary. Even if one postulated that the soul itself is inherited this would not help, for the very fact that the child's corruption of soul is not voluntary loses for it the character of guilt deserving punishment. (Ia-IIae Q. 81 art. 1)

The first step in understanding traditional theology's answer to this problem is to realize that there *is* some intention which being born *does* reproduce. Not indeed a personal intention, but what Aquinas calls 'the intention of nature'. By this phrase he means that tendency of a nature to reproduce itself, which exemplifies itself in living things every time a new animal is born. It is not of course implied that such a tendency is voluntary or conscious in the nature itself, though it results from the creator's conscious intentions.

So far then we are as far away as ever from seeing birth as the reproduction or execution of a voluntary intention. But let us proceed a step further. Without the special grace of paradise, Adam's nature would have reproduced itself such as it was, with all its natural defects; but the grace given to him by God perfected that nature in him and ensured that when it reproduced itself it would do so in the same perfection as it had in Adam. After the fall, however, when this grace had been lost, the nature was abandoned to its own tendency to reproduce itself with defects; only now this tendency—being one

of the effects of Adam's voluntary sin—is not simply natural but also culpable.

Here we have said something about the 'intention' to produce the defects which we have previously said only about the defects themselves. This 'intention' itself (although not a personal intention, but an intention of nature) is now culpable, as being, so to speak, the prolongation of a faulty personal intention. But this 'intention of nature' is reproduced at every birth in the sense that every birth carries this intention into execution; just as the movement of a hand committing a murder carries into execution the intention of the murderer. No one would of course say that the hand was personally guilty of the murder; nevertheless its movement can be called, and properly called, a guilty movement in so far as it is the movement by which the murderer commits his sin. So also being born can be called, and called properly, a guilty movement in so far as it is the movement by which Adam produces faulty progeny.

The analogy being drawn is that between the body of a man engaged in an action—in which the limbs are executing one central personal intention—and the whole 'body' of mankind-engaged-in-reproducing itself—in which every birth is an execution of a central intention of man's nature, an intention voluntarily warped by the first man. This is Aquinas' fundamental point when he wishes to clarify original sin.

> Any individual man can be thought of either as an individual person or as part of some corporation (*collegium*), and actions can belong to him in both these capacities. As an individual person there belong to him the actions he does himself on his own authority; but as a part of a corporation there can belong to him actions he does not do himself on his own authority, but which are done by the whole corporation, or by a majority of its members, or by its leader (for what the king does, the city is said to do, as Aristotle remarks). For such a human corporation is to be thought of as one man, and the different men holding different offices in it are like the different limbs of one physical body, as in St Paul's picture of the members of the Church in I Corinthians 12.
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> The whole family of men, therefore, receiving their human nature from the first parent, must be thought of in this way as one corporation, or better as the one body of one man. And in this family each man—not excluding Adam himself—can be thought of either as an individual person or as a particular limb of this family deriving by way of natural origin from one man. . . .
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> If therefore we consider a particular man as an individual person, the defect he inherits *cannot have the character of guilt*, which must by definition be voluntary. But if we consider this man as, by birth, a particular limb of the whole of mankind—which the first parent is propagating—and think of all men as one man, then the defect *has the character of guilt because of its voluntary source* (the first parent's actual sin). Just as we can say that the movement of the hand by which a murder is committed is not a guilty movement if

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you only think of the hand itself, since the hand was compelled to move by something else; but if you think of the hand as a part of the whole voluntarily-acting man, then the movement is a guilty one, because voluntary.

And so in the same way that murder is not blamed on the hand but on the whole man, so this defect is not called personal sin but a sin of human-kind as a whole; and it does not belong to the person except in the sense that this person is tainted by his kind (*natura*). And just as different parts of a man—his will, his reason, his hand, and so on—are employed in committing a sin, and yet there is only one sin because the source of sinfulness in the actions of these parts is one, namely, the will; so too by reason of its source original sin in human-kind as a whole is thought of as one sin. (*de Malo* Q.4 art. 1)

What St Thomas has found here is an example of guilt which is not guilt-at-source, so to speak; but which is guilt in the process of executing itself. It is possible to call both the will guilty (in the sense of source-guilt) and the movement of the hand guilty (in the sense of executing the intention of the will); but in no sense could one call the murdered man guilty, for he was only receptive of the effects of the guilty movement. St Thomas is avoiding on the one hand attributing source-guilt to anyone but Adam; on the other he is avoiding assimilating the rest of mankind merely to a murdered man who suffers the effects of this guilt but does not share it. The rest of mankind is related to the source-guilt as the limbs and body by which this source-guilt is carried into execution. Mankind is related to the voluntarily-warped intention of nature, as the hand is related to the voluntarily-warped intention of the person.

And we should notice here that even this guilt-in-execution only properly applies to things like hands which are engaged in the wielding as parts of the wielder, and not to things like knives which are only being wielded. So also the non-personal blame of original sin attaches to us only in so far as we are, by nature, involved in the execution of original sin. For we are ourselves voluntarily-acting creatures called to take responsibility for our own existence, called to be voluntarily what we are by nature; so that the tainting of our nature is also necessarily a tainting of the roots of our voluntary being.

Certain things, however, need to be made clearer. For there are certain differences between the will-hand relation and the Adam-descendant relation which must be kept in mind. In the will-hand situation the link is direct and immediate: the personal intention adopted by the will is the actual intention executed by the hand. But in the Adam-descendant situation the link is indirect and mediated: a personal intention of Adam which tainted his own personal life affects first the intention of human nature which taints the whole history of mankind; it is then this intention of nature as executed through the birth of the descendant that taints first the natural life of that descendant, and thus, in so far as our natural life no longer

contains in itself the basic grace of rightness required for our personal lives, taints in some sense that personal life in us. As Aquinas frequently puts it: 'Original sin proceeded in this way: that first a person tainted the nature, and then nature taints a person'.

There are thus two ways in which original sin differs from any imitation of an actual sin. Firstly, it is not a reproduction of Adam's personal sin as such—that is to say, as a sin of Adam as an individual affecting his own personal holiness—but it is a reproduction of Adam's sin in so far as it is a fault of man in caring for man's nature—that is to say, as a sin of 'man in charge of his nature'. In a sense it is a biological accident that 'man in charge of his nature' is here identical with Adam. For it is a sheer law of biology that God could only put 'man in charge of his nature' by giving this charge to individual men one after the other. In the genealogical tree of mankind each man would in turn have stood in this position *vis-à-vis* his progeny. It was because Adam, standing at the beginning in this relation to all mankind, sinned personally that in him 'man in charge of his nature' sinned throughout mankind.

Secondly, the sin is reproduced in the descendant not as a personal sin—that is to say, a sin affecting the descendant's own individual holiness because of his own personal guilt—but is reproduced as a common sinfulness of all men—that is to say, a sin affecting each descendant's own natural and personal holiness because of a guilt in his nature, a guilt precisely as a part of 'man in charge of his nature'.

Difficulties

This traditional explanation of original sin succeeds where many contemporary explanations fail. It succeeds in giving some sort of sense to a guilt which is not personal without reducing that notion to the totally improper use of the word 'guilt' to mean simply misfortune or penalty. Most modern discussions, so it seems to me, avoid this point; and at least in this sense are not explanations of original sin at all, but simply attempts to substitute for original sin the notion, valid in itself, of the solidarity of mankind in the effects of sin.

These discussions start from a modern biblical exegesis which is not inclined to interpret the Genesis story literally. Or rather, modern exegesis realizes that literal interpretation means interpretation according to the literary *genre* in which the story is written. Now in the Old Testament the Adam-story appears to be a kind of extension to all mankind of what we may call the Jeroboam-story. Jeroboam was the first king of the breakaway northern kingdom of Israel; and by causing the schism with the southern kingdom of Judah he committed personal and actual sin, setting up idolatrous shrines to which all Israel could come and worship. The Old Testament's way of saying this is that Jeroboam 'brought sin on all Israel'. It is not so much that he led them astray by his example—

which they then imitated—but that, being their king and father, he led them into a situation, created for them a situation, in which they simply were 'astray'.

This way of thinking about nations is very fundamental to the Old Testament. Every nation is a family, the destiny of which is bound up with its 'father', the person who gave birth to it. This is often expressed by the fact that the nation and the 'father' both have the same name. Thus united Israel had as its father Jacob; and Israel itself is often called 'Jacob', whilst Jacob is often called 'Israel'. Similarly, each of the twelve tribes of Israel has as their father one of Jacob's sons and was called after that son. So too, then, mankind's father is someone called 'Man' (which is what the Hebrew word 'Adam' means). Mankind is thus a family, and 'man' lives a life which is a sort of hypostatization in one individual of the life of man. The sinfulness of mankind as a whole can therefore be presented as a situation 'brought on mankind' by an actual, personal sin of its father, Adam. What cannot be thought of as personal in mankind as a whole, can be thought of as personal in 'Man'. Adam has led us into a situation in which we simply are 'astray'; and each man's birth 'misleads' him into this situation.

Modern theologians have made use of the insights offered them by modern exegesis, and have tried to 'de-individualize' original sin again. Original sin becomes the 'sin of the world'—namely, a situation in which every sin spreads its influence throughout the society of mankind, creating an environment of sinfulness from which a man cannot escape. The various sins described in the Old Testament—the sins of David, the sin of Jeroboam—have had this effect; and most of all, the sin on Calvary whereby God was rejected from mankind. According to such an exegesis the story of Adam is a statement that all sins (coming to their climax in Calvary) affect all men without exception. But such theories fail to explain why being affected by others' sins is itself a sin. They do not explain how original sin can properly be called a sin. As long as such theories are all theologians offer, the Church will remain reluctant to depart from the traditional explanation. For as the Popes have re-iterated, as long as one cannot see any original *sin* in the strict sense in modern scientific and exegetical attempts to re-interpret Adam and the Genesis-story, these attempts must be ruled out of court.

Now this is precipitating a crisis of very large dimensions. For there are many difficulties in the traditional interpretation which make it less and less satisfactory as a full account of the Church's doctrine. The source of all these difficulties, or so it seems to me, is that in the traditional interpretation theology has been so wedded to what I shall call, for brevity's sake, the biological, that biology has been given a position from which its findings can distort and even wreck the theological pattern. This, it seems to me, already happened in St Thomas himself when he admits that if Adam had not sinned, then

every man in turn would have stood as representative of all the progeny that came after him. This has two results: first it becomes possible to conceive a situation in which only the father of all Frenchmen sinned, and in which consequently all Frenchmen were in original sin but no other men on earth's surface. I am not happy about this as really catching the sense of original sin. It connects the possibility of original sin with the unity of *any* group of men who shared human nature, but not essentially with that unity of *all* men in human nature which we call mankind. This seems to underline the fact that biological solidarity as such is not sufficient to explain the kind of unity mankind has. Because of this difficulty theologians have sometimes had recourse to a hidden decree of God which constituted Adam the sole representative of mankind in regard to its nature, despite biological laws; but it is difficult to see why God should do this, and it also does violence to our feeling that mankind should be one naturally. St Thomas refuses to accept, and rightly I think, that Adam had a relation to his nature that was different from the relation any man has.

The second result of this insistence of St Thomas is that for anyone to be born in grace, every single one of his progenitors from Adam down to the immediate father would have had to live totally innocent lives. We might say that in a state of innocence this would have been easier than it is now; nevertheless, the fragility which this seems to introduce into God's plan for gracing mankind asks a a great deal of our faith, or credulity.

But these are not the only difficulties. With the growth of biological knowledge St Thomas' belief that only the husband was active in generation, that only through his contribution did the intention of nature become active, has become untenable in any but a symbolic sense. His biological explanation therefore of why Christ was *not* born in original sin (namely, that he was born only of woman), also becomes untenable in any but a symbolic sense.

Finally, there are the difficulties of which everyone knows due to the development of evolutionary theory. Here it has to be asked whether man could in fact have arisen from one couple. The well-nigh unanimous answer of science is that such an origin for mankind is highly improbable, if not impossible. What then becomes of the whole theological edifice that St Thomas has built up?

It would, of course, be possible to patch the structure piece by piece in response to these difficulties. One could, for instance, like Karl Rahner in a recent number of *Concilium*, explore ways in which a sin could have been initiated not by one man but by a group. But in the end this seems to me to be replacing one image too wedded to science by another equally wedded to it, and less capable of clarifying the central issue of culpability and guilt. It is a rejection of the myth of Genesis in order to replace it by another one. It would seem rather more worth-while here to explore the possibility of divorcing the

theological pattern from all biological involvement. And so I shall now suggest that in the traditional interpretation of original sin a theological pattern is discernible which can be abstracted from that interpretation and applied to man's history in quite a different, and non-biological, manner.

In brief, the suggestion is this. For the solidarity of man in biological nature we shall substitute the solidarity of man in one history, which I conceive as having the unity of a play, the unity given by having a unified plot. For the natural defects of men, symbolized in the Genesis story biologically, we shall substitute the natural inability of mankind to achieve such a unity in history. For the grace which healed man's natural defects we shall substitute the gift of God himself coming down as man to take up life among us and weld us around him into such a unified history: in other words, the incarnation seen as the introduction of the only character round which the play of history can achieve a unified plot. For the loss of this grace by man (represented because of the laws of biology by a particular man, Adam), we shall substitute the banishment of Christ from the ordinary course of history by man (represented because of the laws of history by the particular authorities of his time); the ordinary course of history meaning that course of history which governs our lives between the moments of birth and death. And for the redemption in Christ, considered as undoing an action which far preceded it chronologically, we shall substitute the redemption in Christ, considered as undoing an action chronologically coincident with it. For Christ accepted his rejection from the ordinary course of history, and by so doing built up a new course of history (no longer bounded by birth and death) which precisely builds itself up by rejection of the ordinary course.

It is clear that if such substitutions could be carried out satisfactorily no further difficulties on biological grounds could arise. Especially, there could be no difficulties connected with the existence or non-existence of a first couple, or with the existence or non-existence of a paradisal state. An answer would have been provided to the dilemma of monogenism or polygenism, by depriving the question of all relevance.

[*To be concluded next month*]

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