

Born Fallen in a Fallen World

By Randall Smith

June 10, 2018 – Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Genesis 3.9-15; 2 Corinthians 4.14-5.1; Mark 3.20-35

Few Christian doctrines arouse more ire than the doctrine of original sin. G. K. Chesterton once remarked wryly that “certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved. Some . . . in their almost too fastidious spirituality, admit divine sinlessness, which they cannot see even in their dreams. But they essentially deny human sin, which they can see in the street.” And yet many moderns continue to think of the doctrine of original sin as barbaric, and its most well-known proponent, Saint Augustine, as hopelessly neurotic.

Bad to the Bone?

Unlike the famous Enlightenment *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who thought that children were born pure and innocent and were only corrupted by society – it is probably worth noting that Rousseau did not raise any of his own children – Augustine notices that some of our problems begin right at birth. Babies are cute and adorable, but many of the things they want are things they shouldn’t have. They reach out to put their fingers in a light socket or to touch a hot stove. They want to put dirty things in their mouths. Parents need to keep an eye on them to prevent them from hurting themselves.

Might we view all these characteristics we know exist in babies as a metaphor for our own condition in life? How often do we squeal in complaint when something has been denied us, even though it would harm us terribly? How often when we cry out in frustrated anger do we remain unaware of what we want, let alone really need? How well do we communicate with others? Do you have friends or family members you know who are unhappy and dissatisfied, but you can’t quite figure out why – so much so you wonder whether they know themselves? Perhaps you have found yourself in this conundrum – knowing what you don’t like, but not yet clear on what would be better. Is this something other people do to us? Is it the fault of society or our parents? Or is it just something we’re born with? Let’s call it “the challenge of human life.” We do not spring forth whole from the head of Zeus as the goddess Athena is said to have done. We are born in need, dependent on others to help us, to teach us how to speak and how to get food, clothing, and shelter; how to live well with others and how to flourish in a complex world.

One way of describing the challenge of human life is to say we are born “fallen creatures in a fallen world.” To say we are fallen creatures is to say that our problems are written in our very nature; that they have their ultimate source in mankind’s turn away from God, a condition none of us can escape unless liberated from it by God’s grace. This primordial condition of our nature is not our fault, but it is our responsibility. Babies are not “guilty” of original sin, but they are born into the poverty bequeathed by our first parents. John Steinbeck’s characters the Joads are not guilty of causing the Great Depression, but they are born having to deal with the poverty it caused their family.

Why Do I Do the Evil I Don't Want to Do?

To say we are fallen creatures is to affirm not only that we are not born perfect, but also that our dispositions are for the most part not set in the right direction. It's not merely that we don't know the right thing to do; even when we learn the right thing, we rarely do it. As Saint Paul asks, "Why do I do the evil I don't want to do and not the good I want to do?"

One answer Augustine encountered in his life was, "I do bad, cruel, evil things because I am a soul being dragged down by an impure body." Another answer was, "I am being influenced by a god of evil to do evil." Eventually he decided these answers were insufficient and that the problem was within himself, as it is within each one of us. Although created to do good and love one another selflessly, we choose selfishness instead, a tendency present in us from the very beginning.

As I mentioned, Augustine is sometimes criticized for being too "harsh" about infants. And yet, as anyone who spends any time around children knows, children can be at one moment sweet and loving and in the next, willful, even cruel. Augustine remarks on infants being happy "when the fountain of milk is flowing fresh and abundant," and yet they would not be willing to share that milk even if another child needed it to sustain life. Infants bite, punch, and grab not only one another, but also the parents who love them, even when their parents are holding them and might drop them. "We look leniently on these things," says Augustine, "not because they are not faults, nor because the faults are small, but because they will vanish as age increases. For although you may allow these things now, you could not bear them with equanimity if found in an older person." We tell children even at a fairly young age: "Stop being a baby!" And although we don't hold infants culpable for their bad acts, they have behaviors we do not want to continue.

What Is Education For?

Which side will predominate as the child grows: the "good" side or the "dark" side? If we were basically good people living in a mostly good society, the results would probably be more often positive than negative. But as Augustine points out, we are not born into a world that fosters all our good dispositions and helps us lay aside our selfishness.

Quite the contrary; much of the education Augustine received, as good as it was technically, often only fostered his pride and selfishness. The pressure to be a top student was great, whereas much less attention was paid to the state of his soul and spirit. Even his parents and those who loved him often seemed more interested in his attaining the kind of success that would vault him above his fellow students rather than in his developing the virtues that would have allowed him to serve his neighbors faithfully.

We, too, might ask ourselves what the goal or aim should be of all the effort we put into our children's schooling. Do we subject our young people to many years of intense schooling to expand the greatness of their souls and increase their moral wisdom? Or do we give them technical training in hopes they will be successful and have a good career? Is our world much different from Augustine's?

A House Divided

Christians have an account to explain *why* the world is the way it is and why we are disposed the way we are. Christians trace the origin of the problem to "the fall": the sin of our first parents. But it would be possible for someone to doubt whether that was the source of the problem and yet still affirm the problem. Whatever the *source* of the problem, whether it was something Adam and Eve did, or simply a fact of nature, human beings are born with an ability to do good but also a disposition not to do good. And the world into which we are born often doesn't help make us better; in fact, it often enough makes us worse.

You could say that instead of "fallen" we are "damaged persons in a damaged world." I'm not sure that's any clearer, and someone is just as likely to ask: "How did things get damaged?" But whatever answer we give to that question, perhaps we can agree that we are far from perfect, and the world into which we are born and the culture that develops us are also far from perfect – constituted as they have been by other individuals born and raised as damaged as we are. Ours isn't merely a problem; it is a disease passed down from generation to generation. If we want to help cure it, we're going to have to do better than simply giving in to our natural tendencies toward selfishness.

In the ancient world, it was commonly believed that humans were drawn into a vicious cycle of “an eye for an eye,” with the pendulum swinging one way, then the other, as opposing sides attempted to right the imbalance caused by some great moral evil in the past. A famous example can be found in mythology, in the travails of the House of Atreus, whose members revenged themselves for the crimes of other family members with new unspeakable crimes, unable to restore order or justice themselves. This cycle of violence required the intervention of the god Apollo and the goddess Athena to put it to an end.

We don’t believe these myths; it’s unclear whether even all the Greeks did. But they understood, perhaps only dimly and inchoately, something profound about the human condition – a truth made clearer by the redemptive sacrifice of Christ: namely, that we are incapable of rectifying all that is wrong with the world or even with ourselves, buried in a mess we did not originate, but in which we are called upon to live and move and have our being. As Saint Paul well understood, we cannot “justify” ourselves. We must open ourselves up to a divine order that we do not find within ourselves and cannot realize by our own powers. We are a “house divided,” and a house divided against itself cannot stand.

A House Restored

So how is the building to be restored? How is it to be cleansed? With “grace bestowed in abundance,” says Saint Paul, by which our “inner self is being renewed day by day.” Thus, what is the one unforgiveable sin? To reject the forgiveness of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. To turn away. To say no. Our free will allows us to do that. God will not force us to be happy. But we can no more flourish as human beings if God is absent than a sunflower could flourish if it turned away from the sun.

We are fallen creatures born into a fallen world. But this teaching is not meant as a counsel of despair. It is simply the truth that prepares us for a sign of hope. God has not left us to rot in our sins. He is not the “clockmaker God” who has gone off somewhere and fallen asleep. What Saint Augustine came to realize about his life after his conversion to the Christian faith, and then wrote about brilliantly in his *Confessions*, was that God was never far from him, nor was it possible for him to be far from God. God was always present in Augustine’s life, calling him in love, sending gifts, surrounding him with people to guide him and help him along his way. Augustine had turned away, but “with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.”

So, although we are fallen creatures in a fallen world, burdened with our sins, weighed down by a world that encourages some of our worst instincts rather than appealing to the better angels of our nature, we have hope in Christ, who erupts into the world to break the vicious cycle of darkness and despair, like the sun breaking through the dark storm clouds.

We must turn back to the sun: open the doors and windows to the house. For “the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also.” If we die to sin with Christ, we will be raised with Christ in glory. The pains that result from being fallen in a fallen world, as real as they are, are, as Saint Paul teaches, “a momentary light affliction, producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

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For Further Reading

Benedict XVI, “[Saint Paul \(15\): The Apostle’s Teaching on the Relation between Adam and Christ](#)”

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##385-421](#)

Stéphane Harent, “[Original Sin](#),” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*

St. John Paul II, “[Consequences of Original Sin for All Humanity](#)”

Magis Center, “[The Fall and Original Sin](#)”

In Short . . .

- ***Not only are we not born perfect, but our dispositions are for the most part not set in the right direction.***
- ***This primordial condition of our nature is not our fault, but it is our responsibility.***
- ***The world into which we are born often doesn’t help make us better; in fact, it often enough makes us worse.***
- ***We are incapable of rectifying all that is wrong with the world or even with ourselves; as Saint Paul well understood, we cannot “justify” ourselves.***
- ***We must open ourselves up to a divine order that we do not find within ourselves and cannot realize by our own powers.***
- ***The one unforgiveable sin is to reject the forgiveness of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit; our free will allows us to do that, but we cannot flourish as human beings if God is absent.***