

The First Sunday of Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7
<i>Response</i>	Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 5:12-19
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 4:1-11

For the last several weeks, we've been working through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, looking at the opening chapters of that letter. That's what the Church does in Ordinary Time for Year A. But now we shift into the season of Lent, and when the Church moves into the season of Lent, the selection of the second readings for each of the Sundays of Lent is chosen according to a different principle.

So...just a little refresher here. In Ordinary Time, the Church chooses passages from Paul's letters according to the principle of semi-continuous reading, working through—in this case the first chapters of—the first letter to the Corinthians in order. When Lent comes, however, the Church changes the way She selects the letters of Paul and chooses passages according to thematic correspondence with the Sundays of Lent. So it's going to be a different organizing principle. So as we work through these six Sundays of the Lenten season, we're going to be looking at very important passages from the letters of Paul that are chosen by the Church to correspond with the particular theme for that Sunday's Gospel. And as you're going to see, the themes of sin and penance and salvation and resurrection are going to run like a golden thread through the letters of Paul that are chosen for each of these Sundays of Lent.

So for the first Sunday of Lent in Year A, the Church chooses the Old Testament reading that describes the fall of Adam and Eve—the first sin that leads to sin and death in the world. And then it chooses the Gospel of Jesus' temptations in the

dessert, where Christ is revealed as a new Adam who comes into the world to undo the effects of the fall. With those two texts in mind, the Church gives us today the second reading, which is Paul's famous text about original sin, in which he describes sin and death coming into the world through Adam and then Christ coming into the world as a new Adam who is going to undo the effects of the fall.

So this is an extremely important text. It's one of the most complicated and theologically rich passages in all of Paul's letters, which is saying a lot for the apostle Paul. We're going to try our best to do it justice by focusing on, in particular, how this passage lays the foundation for the Church's doctrine of original sin—which is extremely important, essential, for understanding the Gospel according to the Paul. Think about it. What is the Gospel? It's the Good News of salvation. Well, you can't really appreciate the Good News of salvation if you don't appreciate the bad news of sin and damnation and sin and death. And that's really what the Church lays before us today on this first Sunday of Lent. So let's read through the second reading for today. It's from Romans 5:12-19. This is Paul's great letter to the Romans, his most theologically sophisticated letter. And this is what he says:

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— sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.¹

I hope you can see that there's a lot going on there, that this is a very, very rich text. So let's take a deep breath, and then we'll walk through it and try to at least shed a little bit of light on this consequential text.

So the first point we want to highlight there, the first term that should leap out at you is the word "sin." In Greek, the word is *hamartia*. It literally means to "miss the mark." It also can be used to describe a transgression of one of God's commandments or one of God's laws—a failure to love God or to love neighbor. Think about the Ten Commandments. The first tablet of the Ten Commandments is love of God—not having other Gods, not breaking the Sabbath, not taking His name in vain. To break one of those is to fail in love of God, to miss the mark.

The second tablet of the Ten Commandments—honor your father and mother, don't commit adultery, don't kill, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't covet. These are sins against love of neighbor. They miss the mark, the standard of love that God calls human beings to in the Decalogue, in the Ten Commandments.

So what Paul is saying here is interesting. He's not talking so much about sin as a particular transgression, but more as a power. So that he says that...

...sin came into the world through one man...

Of course, here Paul is alluding to Genesis 3 and the fall of Adam—which literally means "man" in Hebrew...the one man, the first man, the first parent of the human race. So Paul here is reflecting the typical Jewish idea that God—this is important—creates Adam and Eve (in Genesis 1 and 2) good. In fact, He says they're very good. He doesn't create them in a state of sin. He doesn't create them in a state of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

death. He creates them in a state of righteousness, of goodness, where there is not yet any sin. And it's only when Adam violates the commandment against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge that he brings sin...and through sin, death, into the world. In Genesis 3, after Adam eats of the fruit of the tree, what does God say?

...you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:19c)

So the punishment of death falls upon Adam, Eve, and their descendants. So Paul here is just, in a sense, summarizing Genesis 3, but he's describing the entry of sin into the world, and through sin, death coming into the world.

Second point here that's interesting is when Paul describes death here, he's not just talking about physical death—the separation of the soul and the body and the decay of a human corpse. He's actually personifying death itself as kind of a king. Notice what he says here. After that fall, after sin comes into the world through Adam, and after death comes into the world through his sin, death spreads to all human beings, and he even says that death reigned from Adam to Moses.

And the Greek word there for “reign” is *basileuō*. It's the same verb that's the root of the noun that Jesus talks about when He talks about the kingdom of God, *basileia* of God. So just as God reigns through His kingdom, so too death reigns as king over humanity, over human beings, after the commission of that first sin by Adam. You could say in a sense that Adam brings the kingdom of death into the world. He gives death power over humanity, and so Paul says death therefore reigns as king all the way from Adam to Moses, and this is interesting:

...even over those [human beings] whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam...

So think here, for example, of Adam's children or his grandchildren— all human beings who were descended from the first parents. They didn't eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. They didn't break the explicit commandment of God not to partake. Adam is the only one who commits an actual transgression, a violation of that initial commandment. And yet, through his transgression, death is going to come and it's going to reign over those even who have never sinned at all. For

example, children who die in the womb or children who die in infancy or children who die even before they reach the age of reason—they're not actually even able to commit a transgression. The Greek word there is *parabasis*. It literally means “to walk over” the line, to cross a line, to deliberately violate a law of God. Well, obviously there are billions of human beings and billions of souls that have come into this world that died before they were ever able to commit a transgression like Adam did. And yet, Paul says, death reigns over them. That's their inheritance, so to speak, from their first parent—from Adam.

And that this Adam—number 3, here's the key point—the Adam who brought sin and death into the world was a type of the one who was to come. Now the Greek here is *tupos*, and it's the root word from which we get the theological term of “typology.” Which if you've watched any of my videos, you'll know the Church does very frequently in the lectionary. She will often look at how Old Testament types, or prefigurations, point forward to and are fulfilled in New Testament realities...whether it be persons or events. This is called typology. It's the science or the study of how the Old Testament prefigures the New, and how the New Testament fulfills the Old. And Paul here is one of the first proponents of an explicit typology in which the one man Adam prefigures and points forward to the one man Christ, who is a kind of new Adam—a new and greater Adam. Paul doesn't use the exact language of new Adam. He's going to call Christ the “last Adam” in another letter (1 Corinthians 15), but he is definitely engaging in typology. Adam and Christ are related to one another. They parallel one another. They're both similar and different, and that typological connection helps you understand who Jesus is—this is important—and how He comes into the world to save humanity.

How exactly does Jesus save the whole human race? Have you ever thought about that? Why does this particular man, this Jew from Galilee, from Nazareth, from a little village in Nazareth...how does He, through His life and death, have the power to save every human being who has ever lived? If you've grown up Christian, you've just kind of assumed, “Well, of course, yeah, Jesus has the power to save all of humanity.” Well, how exactly does that work? Paul here gives us a clue by looking at the typology of Adam and Christ.

So one helpful way to do this is to set up a chart of the various parallels—similarities and dissimilarities—between Adam and Christ. So if you look at this outline here for just a moment...if you look on the left hand side here, you'll see the one man Adam. And then on the right hand side, we see the one man Jesus Christ.

So there are parallels between the two. On the one hand, Adam commits a trespass (a sin) that brings death and condemnation into the world. On the other hand, Christ gives us the free gift of grace that brings life into the world...and through His life, gives justification or acquittal (forgiveness) as opposed to condemnation. Again, on the one hand, it's through Adam's disobedience (taking the fruit of the tree) that many—which literally means “all” here, it's just a multitude of people—were made sinners...*hamartoloi* in Greek. In other words, people who miss the mark. On the other hand, Christ the new Adam, through one act of obedience—namely, obedience to His Father and going to the cross—makes many people to be righteous...*dikaios* or just.

So, what do these parallels show us? They help us understand the reason (one reason) Jesus is able to save all of humanity through His act of obedience is because He is recapitulating the fall of Adam. He is taking that up into Himself, through His words and His actions—and above all through the cross—and He is undoing the effects of the fall. And you can actually see this in the Gospel for this week in an anticipatory way, because the Gospel describes Jesus going out into the desert and being tempted three times by the devil. And unlike the first Adam who gives into temptation, Christ the new Adam in the desert overcomes temptation. He defeats the devil, so that—here, this is very important—He can give humanity the power to do the same, to engage in the spiritual battle against Satan and to overcome and to obey rather than disobey.

Now the ultimate act of obedience by which Jesus will conquer the devil will be of course on Calvary through the cross. Which, He will be tempted on the cross. Some of the bystanders will say, “If you are really the Son of God, come down from the cross.” But Jesus will (in obedience to the Father) take up the cross—literally—of the cup of suffering and offer His life and His blood in His act of obedience for the salvation of the world. As He says elsewhere:

...the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:28)

So we see the same language being used here by Paul in Romans 5. So it's a beautiful, power description of the mystery of the cross. And I just want to pause here for a second, before we get to original sin and what the Church says here. I just want you to think about this as we move through the Lenten season. I think people often will think of Jesus as the great teacher who gives us the Sermon on the Mount. He saves us by teaching us the truth. We'll even think of him as the Lord, God who becomes man...the Son of God who becomes the Son of Man who brings into the world the kingdom of God...delivers people from sin and from error. But I'm not so sure in modern day times we often think of Jesus as readily as the new Adam, as the one who comes into the world to undo the effects of the fall...to undo the effects of the sin of Adam, to deliver us not just from sin, but from the kingdom of death that Adam brings into the world. And that's what Christ is going to do not just through the cross, but through His resurrection.

So I just invite you to consider that as you're moving toward and starting the journey toward Easter and the resurrection. How is Christ the new Adam? What are the implications of that for who He is and how He saves?

Alright, now with that said, I'd like to close here with a few words from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, because this passage, Romans 5, is the foundational text for the Church's doctrine of original sin.

Now I've been teaching theology for a number of years now, and in my experience, the doctrine of original sin is one of the most widely misunderstood doctrines. It's also one of the doctrines that I think many otherwise devout, faithful Catholics often either struggle with or actually reject or don't believe. There are lots of people in my experience—I've met students who think they believe in original sin but they actually don't...and others who disbelieve in it when they don't actually know what the doctrine is. So there's just a lot of confusion about this doctrine, so I want to look at what the Church teaches and how this doctrine flows out of what we just read, today's reading from St. Paul in Romans 5. I'll be quoting here from

the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It's a long quotation, but let's read it together carefully, and then we'll end with a few observations about the importance of this particular doctrine.

Alright, so this is from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 403-405:

Following St. Paul, the Church has always taught that the overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination toward evil and death cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam's sin and the fact that he has transmitted to us a sin with which we are all born afflicted, a sin which is the "death of the soul." Because of this certainty of faith, the Church baptizes for the remission of sins even tiny infants who have not committed personal sin.

Alright, so pause there. Notice the first thing. What is the definition of original sin? The definition of original sin is "spiritual death." It's a kind of death of the soul. And where does the Church get this doctrine from? Well, you can see. It says explicitly in the *Catechism*, "following St. Paul." So here there's a footnote showing the allusion here is to Romans 5, the passage we just read. So we really can't understand all of the misery and suffering that affects humanity if we don't understand that it has its root cause in the sin of Adam. That's the first point the Church is making here. Alright, let's keep going. Next, the *Catechism* continues:

How did the sin of Adam become the sin of all his descendants? The whole human race is in Adam "as one body of one man." By this "unity of the human race" all men are implicated in Adam's sin, as all are implicated in Christ's justice. Still, the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand. But we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state. It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice.

Alright, pause there. This is the real question that—at least in my experience—students always want to have. “Well, how does Adam’s sin get transmitted to us? I didn’t do anything. I didn’t eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. It’s not my fault. Why am I affected by this sin?” And what the *Catechism* is explaining here—this is really important—that strictly speaking, original sin is not something but rather the absence of something. Notice what it says there...it’s a deprivation. It’s a lack of the original holiness and original righteousness with which Adam was created—or in which Adam was created.

So the Church here is just reflecting again the narrative of Genesis chapter 2 and 3. When God makes man and woman, He doesn’t make them sinful. He makes them good. He makes them in a state which the Church refers to as the state of original holiness or original righteousness, original justice. And according to the *Catechism* a few paragraphs earlier, it says in that state, they’re in perfect communion with God, perfect communion with one another, and they don’t have to suffer and they don’t have to die. There are certain gifts of grace — immortality is one of them — that they have in that original state. And it’s only through sin that they lose the grace of original holiness and original justice.

So after that sin, they then pass on to their offspring, through propagation—it means reproduction—a human nature which is deprived of grace. It’s lacking the grace of original holiness. And you don’t have to be a theologian to look around and see that when human beings come into this world, we’re not in perfect harmony with one another. We’re not in perfect harmony with God. If you have children, you’ll know that probably their first word was “no.” Disobedience is built into our broken human nature, our fallen human state.

And so the Church here is revealing this mystery that through the unity of the human race—notice here that the Church is presupposing that all human beings are descended from our first parents. That’s how original sin is transmitted by propagation to all humankind. Every single human being that is born into this world is born with that deprivation of original holiness and justice. We’re born in a state which the Church calls “original sin.” Now let’s keep going...last paragraph here. To clarify exactly what that means, the Church says this, and this is crucial:

And that is why original sin is called “sin” only in an analogical sense: it is a sin “contracted” and not “committed”—a state and not an act. Although it is proper to each individual, original sin does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam’s descendants. It is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted: it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death; and inclined to sin—an inclination to evil that is called “concupiscence.” Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ’s grace, erases original sin and turns a man back toward God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle.²

That’s the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 403-405. So notice, although original sin is a mystery, the Church does clarify one last aspect of it that’s very important—namely, that technically speaking, original sin is a state and not an act. It’s not a personal fault. In other words, although each human being is born with original sin, we’re not culpable for it. We’re not guilty of it, because it’s a state into which we’re born, not an act which we committed. So it doesn’t have the character of a personal fault. What it has the character of is a state of deprivation—we’re missing something.

Think of it this way by analogy. If a person was a millionaire, and they squandered their money gambling, and they lost it all, would they be able to give that million dollars to their son or their daughter? No. The son or daughter would be deprived of that inheritance because it had been lost. Because you can’t give what you don’t have. And just as that’s true in the order of nature with earthly possessions, there’s a sense in which that’s true in the order of grace as well. Once Adam loses the gift of grace—which is worth much more than a million dollars—he’s unable to pass that gift on to his offspring. So every human being is born in a state of deprivation of that grace of original holiness.

However—and this is crucial—it doesn’t mean that our human nature is totally wicked or totally corrupted. Human beings are still good, but we’re wounded and

² CCC 403-405

we're inclined to sin. We're weakened because of original sin. And that inclination to the evil rather than good — that makes your children say “no” as their first word —that inclination is called concupiscence. It's the weakness of our human nature. And the whole reason—this is important—we baptize infants in the Church's tradition is to give the life of grace and to remove original sin and fill the life of a child (the soul of a child) with God's grace, with the grace of the Holy Spirit so that our hearts can be turned back to God. However (this is important), although original sin itself is forgiven through Baptism, the consequences of original sin—namely, the inclination to sin, that concupiscence—God actually allows that weakness, that inclination, to remain in the soul. You might think, “Well, why? Why didn't He just give me original holiness and take away the weakness?” And the answer is this—very important—to summon us to spiritual battle. This is important. God wants to call each human being into the spiritual battle between the kingdom of death (the kingdom of Satan that Jesus comes to overthrow) and the kingdom of God that Jesus comes to bring.

And so it's fitting that we end with that point, because that's really what Lent is all about. Those of us who have been baptized...original sin has been erased. And through grace, we have been turned back to God, but we're still in the desert. We still have to fight. We haven't made it home to the Promised Land yet. And so Lent is the season of spiritual battle. That's what we're doing during this season. So the Church begins by reminding us of the mystery of original sin and then summoning us with Jesus in the desert to spiritual battle as we journey toward Easter.