

“THE DIVINE SPARK OF LOVE”: BAPTISM AND ORIGINAL SIN

In my early days celebrating baptisms, a relative standing nearby typically captured the pouring of water with **flash** photography. Too often that flash was quickly followed by **headaches** that I dreaded. Traditional cameras have largely given way to smart phones boasting very adequate cameras, minimizing this problem. While I appreciate a family’s desire to capture this special moment, it is equally true that Baptism represents the most **significant and serious** moment of our Christian lives. And the inconvenient aspect of this sacrament is its removal of **Original Sin**, a concept with which many wrestle. I selected the word “inconvenient” because on the **joyous day** in which we welcome a new baby to the Church, it is tempting to **brush aside** the reality of the human condition amidst the laudable desire to celebrate. **Resist** that urge. It is a joyous day for **dual reasons**— we are freed from original sin and made members of the Body of Christ— in that order.

The **Council of Trent** dealt with this thorny topic in great detail in its session of 17 June 1546. While disputes about the nature of original sin were not new, ideas about its corrupting effect on human nature were spreading quickly and the Church needed to respond. It is impossible to understand the story of the Fall in the Garden without seeing it in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Catechism so aptly describes, the Church “knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ.” (CCC # 389) That’s ecclesiastical speak for “Not goin’ there!” And the reasons why we **mustn’t tamper** with original sin are important. As difficult as it may be to gaze upon a little baby and intuit original sin, such a response— while humanly understandable—misses the key point. We are part of the **human family**. We were neither created in isolation, nor do we exist in isolation.

The choice of our first parents was fundamental and foundational, affecting us all. They forfeited the *preternatural gifts*, those favors granted by God that are **above** our capacities by nature, among them being the absence of concupiscence and bodily immortality. Now, I am not trying to “impress” you here with big words— these are the terms. **Concupiscence** is yet another fancy term for our tendency to sin. It is the **constant tug** we feel that is drawing us away from God. It may refer to our passions, our appetites, our disordered desire for money, power, greed or lust to name but a few. Adam and Eve were granted these preternatural gifts, along with infused knowledge, but due to the fall of Adam, they were **squandered** for good. It was an irrevocable choice. Another aspect figuring prominently is that of evil. We cannot comprehend the fall in Eden without acknowledging the existence of evil. “Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 391)

While Satan tempted, Adam nonetheless had free will. And guess what? So do we! Our **free will** remains intact. As Catholics, we would say that we are **deprived**, but **not** depraved. Adam allowed his trust in God to waver and through the sin of pride, he abused that first freedom and disobeyed. He chose man over God— he chose **his own will**, not God’s. The principal disagreement (a nice way of putting it!) about original sin with the Reformers focused on **diametrically opposed** views of human nature. Classic Protestant theology placed emphasis on the depravity of human nature, whereas the Catholic response at Trent was to state unequivocally: “If anyone says that the guilt of original sin is not remitted through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which is given in baptism, or even asserts that all which pertains to the true essence of sin is not removed, but declares it is only erased and not attributed: let him be anathema.” (Trent, session V, para. 5) While this is strong language, we affirm that Original Sin is **not merely covered** over (Luther’s image). Rather, through sanctifying grace we are truly **inwardly changed**, though the tendency to sin remains.

“We must know Christ as the source of grace in order to know Adam as the source of sin.” (CCC # 388) Sin entered through a choice made by another, not us. Thus, original sin is **not a personal sin**, though we all do share the same human nature. When we think of sin, we automatically think of an action. We should here think instead of a **deprivation** or a void, in this case of original holiness. When relaxing, I prefer to watch classic films or shows about classic cars, about which I know nothing. But that’s why it is interesting— to learn about something new. It is as if we purchased a new car, only to discover it was missing its **spark plugs**. Absent these, even the most state-of-the-art car will falter, lacking the “spark” that would ignite its fuel, namely God’s sanctifying grace filling our souls.

Baptism removes original sin and fills the soul with sanctifying grace, making us pleasing in God's sight. It unleashes the **divine spark** of God's love within. Think of **Michelangelo's** Creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel, the fingers of Adam and God *almost touching*, but not quite. The moment of creation is when God stretched out His creative hand and breathed into us an immortal soul. We are made a new creation. During the baptismal anointing with Chrism, the priest or deacon says: "God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into His holy people." May we truly marvel at how God transforms our souls through the grace of Baptism.

- **Beijing** is once again turning up the heat on Catholics. The Vatican operates an unofficial diplomatic mission in a Hong Kong suburb, the closest semblance it has to diplomatic relations. Two **nuns** stationed there were detained for three weeks after a home visit to the Chinese mainland. They are not allowed to return to the Mission. Keen observers see it as an attempt by the Communist government to **influence the choice** of a new Archbishop in Hong Kong, a post that has been vacant for three years.
- Let us pray for our **police officers**. I saw video of Minneapolis Police being heckled mercilessly while forming a perimeter at a crime scene, even though they were not involved in the incident in question. They face precarious situations and must make split second decisions in the blink of an eye. Healing tensions over policing tactics will require **honesty** and **good will** on all sides.
- Just as the bulletin went to press, Governor Walz loosened some restrictions on places of worship beginning Monday January 11. Churches will remain at 50 percent capacity, but the new order no longer limits the overall number of worshipers. This directly affects larger church buildings such as the Cathedral. Stay tuned!
- When troubled by a **bad thought**, the best thing you can do is focus on ditching it, so it never comes back. Case in point– **Nepal**. I cannot explain why the urge to **trek in high altitudes** has returned, but it has. My screen saver isn't helping– the Himalaya mountain range is spectacular. I'm four years older now. This would be a **stupendously stupid** idea! But I can't help myself.

Sincerely in Christ,

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Rector