

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ANCESTRAL SIN AND ORIGINAL SIN

The differences between the doctrine of Ancestral Sin - as understood in the church of the first two centuries and the present-day Eastern Church - and the doctrine of Original Sin - developed by Augustine and his heirs in the Western Christian traditions - is explored. The impact of these two formulations on pastoral practice is investigated. It is suggested that the doctrine of ancestral sin naturally leads to a focus on human death and Divine compassion as the inheritance from Adam, while the doctrine of original sin shifts the center of attention to human guilt and Divine wrath. It is further posited that the approach of the ancient church points to a more therapeutic than juridical approach to pastoral care and counseling.

The Approach of the Greek Fathers

As pervasive as the term *original sin* has become, it may come as a surprise to some that it was unknown in both the Eastern and Western Church until Augustine (c. 354-430). The concept may have arisen in the writings of Tertullian, but the expression seems to have appeared first in Augustine's works. Prior to this the theologians of the early church used different terminology indicating a contrasting way of thinking about the fall, its effects and God's response to it. The phrase the Greek Fathers used to describe the tragedy in the Garden was *ancestral sin*.

Ancestral sin has a specific meaning. The Greek word for sin in this case, *amartema*, refers to an individual act indicating that the Eastern Fathers assigned full responsibility for the sin in the Garden to Adam and Eve alone. The word *amartia*, the more familiar term for sin which literally means "missing the mark", is used to refer to the condition common to all humanity (Romanides, 2002). The Eastern Church, unlike its Western counterpart, never speaks of guilt being passed from Adam and Eve to their progeny, as did Augustine. Instead, it is posited that each person bears the guilt of his or her own sin. The question becomes, "What then is the inheritance of humanity from Adam and Eve if it is not guilt?" The Greek Fathers answer as one: *death*. (I Corinthians 15:21) "Man is born with the parasitic power of death within him," writes Fr. Romanides (2002, p. 161). Our nature, teaches Cyril of Alexandria, became "diseased...through the sin of one" (Migne, 1857-1866a). It is not guilt that is passed on, for the Greek fathers; it is a condition, a disease.

In Eastern Church thought Adam and Eve were created with a vocation: to become one with God gradually increasing in their capacity to share in His divine life-deification (Romanides, 2002, p. 76-77). "They needed to mature, to grow to awareness by willing detachment and faith, a loving trust in a personal God" (Clement, 1993, p. 84). Theophilus of Antioch (2nd Century) posits that Adam and Eve were created neither immortal nor mortal. They were created with the potential to become either through obedience or disobedience (Romanides, 2002).

One of the things we have to consider is whether the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden is truly meant to be a revelation or prophecy or, as we have seen in the analysis of Genesis, just a story that tries to explain why life is the way that it is. Is it rather more realistic to think that God created us with limitations and free will so that we can grow in His LIKENESS as seen in Jesus Christ and that He has, for all eternity, decided that He would become incarnate as Jesus and become the archetype

of humanity, showing humans how to live in order to accomplish the primary task of earthly life, namely personal transformation and growth. We must always remember that the Church, since it stemmed from Judaism, saw Genesis as fundamental and had to conform its theories from the basis of this Scripture. It would seem that the story of Genesis was a story that the Jewish people saw as "explaining" why life is the way that it is, namely a struggle and a challenge. They did not understand that the challenges and struggles of life are meant to help humans grow.

The freedom to obey or disobey belonged to our first parents, "For God made man free and sovereign" (Romanides, 2002, p. 32). To embrace their God-given vocation would bring life, to reject it would bring death, but not at God's hands. Theophilus continues, "...should he keep the commandment of God he would be rewarded with immortality...if, however, he should turn to things of death by disobeying God, he would be the cause of death to himself" (Romanides, 2002, p. 32)

Adam and Eve failed to obey the commandment not to eat from the forbidden tree thus rejecting God and their vocation to manifest the fullness of human existence (Yannaras, 1984). This seems to be a rather simplistic story. Death and corruption began to reign over the creation. "Sin reigned through death." (Romans 5:21) In this view death and corruption do not originate with God; he neither created nor intended them. God cannot be the Author of evil. Death is the natural result of turning aside from God.

Why do we have to think that humankind did something that caused two things: death and also the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. Why can't we think that God created us, in His great wisdom, to be incomplete and having to work to grow into the persons that He intended when He created us.

Adam and Eve were overcome with the same temptation that afflicts all humanity: to be autonomous, to go their own way, to realize the fullness of human existence without God. According to the Greek fathers sin is not a violation of an impersonal law or code of behavior, but a rejection of the life offered by God (Yannaras, 1984). This is the mark, to which the word *amartia* refers. Fallen human life is above all else the failure to realize the God-given potential of human existence, which is, as St. Peter writes, to "become partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4). St. Basil writes: "Humanity is an animal who has received the vocation to become God" (Clement, 1993, p. 76).

In Eastern thought God did not threaten Adam and Eve with punishment nor was He angered or offended by their sin; He was moved to compassion. The expulsion from the Garden and from the Tree of Life was an act of love and not vengeance so that humanity would not "become immortal in sin" (Romanides, 2002, p. 32). Thus began the preparation for the Incarnation of the Son of God and the solution that alone could rectify the situation: the destruction of the enemies of humanity and God, death (I Corinthians 15:26, 56), sin, corruption and the devil (Romanides, 2002).

It is important to note that salvation as deification is not pantheism because the Greek Fathers insist on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (Athanasius, 1981). Human beings, along with all created things, have come into being from nothing. Created beings will always remain created and God will always remain Uncreated. The Son of God in the Incarnation crossed the unbridgeable chasm between them. Eastern hymnography frequently speaks of the paradox of the Uncreated and created uniting without mixture or confusion in the wondrous

hypostatic union. The Nativity of Christ, for example, is interpreted as "a secret re-creation, by which human nature was assumed and restored to its original state" (Clement, 1993, p. 41). God and human nature, separated by the Fall, are reunited in the Person of the Incarnate Christ and redeemed through His victory on the Cross and in the Resurrection by which death is destroyed (I Corinthians 15:54-55). In this way the Second Adam fulfills the original vocation and reverses the tragedy of the fallen First Adam opening the way of salvation for all.

The Fall could not destroy the image of God; the great gift given to humanity remained intact, but damaged (Romanides, 2002). Origen speaks of the image buried as in a well choked with debris (Clement, 1993). While the work of salvation was accomplished by God through Jesus Christ the removal of the debris that hides the image in us calls for free and voluntary cooperation. St. Paul uses the word synergy, or "co-workers", (I Corinthians 3:9) to describe the cooperation between Divine Grace and human freedom. For the Greek Fathers this means asceticism (prayer, fasting, charity and keeping vigil) relating to St. Paul's image of the spiritual athlete (I Corinthians 9:24-27). This is the working out of salvation "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Salvation is a process involving faith, freedom and personal effort to fulfill the commandment of Christ to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).

The great Eastern hymn of Holy Pascha (Easter) captures in a few words the essence of the Eastern understanding of the At-one-ment: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, And upon those in the tombs bestowing life" (The Liturgikon, Paschal services, 1989). Because of the victory of Christ on the Cross and in the Tomb humanity has been set free, the curse of the law has been broken, death is slain, life has dawned for all. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580 - 662) writes that "Christ's death on the Cross is the judgment of judgment" (Clement, 1993, p. 49) and because of this we can rejoice in the conclusion stated so beautifully by Olivier Clement: "In the crucified Christ forgiveness is offered and life is given. For humanity it is no longer a matter of fearing judgment or of meriting salvation, but of welcoming love in trust and humility" (Clement, 1993, p. 49).

Augustine's Legacy

The piety and devotion of Augustine is largely unquestioned by Eastern theologians, but his conclusions on the At-one-ment are (Romanides, 2002). Augustine, by his own admission, did not properly learn to read Greek and this was a liability for him. He seems to have relied mostly on Latin translations of Greek texts (Augustine, 1956a, p. 9). His misinterpretation of a key scriptural reference, Romans 5:12, is a case in point (Meyendorff, 1979). In Latin the Greek idiom *eph ho* which means *because of* was translated as *in whom*. Saying that all have sinned *in Adam* is quite different than saying that all sinned *because of him*. Augustine believed and taught that all humanity has sinned in Adam (Meyendorff, 1979, p. 144). The result is that guilt replaces death as the ancestral inheritance (Augustine, 1956b) Therefore the term *original sin* conveys the belief that Adam and Eve's sin is the first and universal transgression in which all humanity participates.

Augustine famously debated Pelagius (c. 354-418) over the place the human will could play in salvation. Augustine took the position against him that only grace is able to save, *sola gratis* (Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, 7). From this a doctrine of predestination developed (God gives grace to whom He will) which hardened in the 16th and 17th centuries into the doctrine of two-fold predestination (God in His sovereignty saves some and condemns others). The position of the Church of the first two centuries concerning the image and human freedom was abandoned.

The Roman idea of justice found prominence in Augustinian and later Western theology. The idea that Adam and Eve offended God's infinite justice and honor made of death God's method of retribution (Romanides, 2002). But this idea of justice deviates from Biblical thought. Kalomiris (1980) explains the meaning of justice in the original Greek of the New Testament.

The Greek word *diakosuni* 'justice', is a translation of the Hebrew word *tsedaka*. The word means 'the divine energy which accomplishes man's salvation.' It is parallel and almost synonymous with the word *hesed* which means 'mercy', 'compassion', 'love', and to the word *emeth* which means 'fidelity', 'truth'. This is entirely different from the juridical understanding of 'justice'. (p. 31)

The juridical view of justice generates two problems for Augustine. One: how can one say that the attitude of the immutable God's toward His creation changes from love to wrath? Two: how can God, who is good, be the author of such an evil as death (Romanides, 1992)? The only way to answer this is to say, as Augustine did to the young Bishop, Julian of Eclanum (d. 454), that God's justice is inscrutable (Cahill, 1995, p. 65). Logically, then, justice provides proof of inherited guilt for Augustine, because since all humanity suffers the punishment of death and since God who is just cannot punish the innocent, then all must be guilty in Adam. Also, by similar reasoning, justice appears as a standard to which even God must adhere (Kalomiris, 1980). Can God change or be subject to any kind of standard or necessity? By contrast the Greek father, Basil the Great, attributes the change in attitude to humanity rather than to God (Migne, 1857-1866b). Because of the theological foundation laid by Augustine and taken up by his heirs, the conclusion seems unavoidable that a significant change occurs in the West making the wrath of God and not death the problem facing humanity (Romanides, 1992, p. 155-156).

How then could God's anger be assuaged? The position of the ancient Church had no answer because its proponents did not see wrath as the problem. The Satisfaction Theory proposed by Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033-1109) in his work *Why the God-Man?* provides the most predominant answer in the West. The sin of Adam offended and angered God making the punishment of death upon all guilty humanity justified. The antidote to this situation is the crucifixion of the Incarnate Son of God because only the suffering and death of an equally eternal being could ever satisfy the infinite offense of the infinitely dishonored God and assuage His wrath (Williams, 2002; Yannaras, 1984, p. 152). God sacrifices His Son to restore His honor and pronounces the sacrifice sufficient. The idea of imputed righteousness rises from this. The Eastern Church's understanding that "the resurrection...through Christ, opens for humanity the way of love that is stronger than death" (Clement, 1993, p. 87) is replaced by a juridical theory of courtrooms and verdicts.

The image of an angry, vengeful God haunts the West where a basic insecurity and guilt seem to exist. Many appear to hold that sickness, suffering and death are

God's will. Why? I suspect one reason is that down deep the belief persists that God is still angry and must be appeased. Yes, sickness, suffering and death come and when they do God's grace can transform them into life-bearing trials, but are they God's will? Does God punish us when the mood strikes, when our behavior displeases Him or for no reason at all? Are the ills that afflict creation on account of God? For example, could the loving Father really be said to enjoy the sufferings of His Son or of the damned in hell (Yannaras, 1984)? Freud rebelled against these ideas calling the God inherent in them the *sadistic Father* (Yannaras, 1984, p. 153). Could it be as Yannaras, Clement and Kalomiris propose that modern atheism is a healthy rebellion against a terrorist deity (Clement, 2000)? Kalomiris (1980) writes that there are no atheists, just people who hate the God in whom they have been taught to believe.

The Eastern Church agrees that grace is a gift, but one that is given to all not to a chosen few. For Grace is an uncreated energy of God sustaining all creation apart from which nothing can exist (Psalm 104:29). What is more, though grace sustains humanity, salvation cannot be forced upon us (or withheld) by divine decree. Clement points out that the "Greek fathers (and some of the Latin Fathers), according to whom the creation of humanity entailed a real risk on God's part, laid the emphasis on salvation through love: 'God can do anything except force a man to love him'. The gift of grace saves, but only in an encounter of love" (Clement, 1993, p. 81). Eastern Christian theology holds that divine grace must be joined with human volition.

Pastoral Practice East and West

In simple terms, we can say that the Eastern Church tends towards a therapeutic model which sees sin as illness, while the Western Church tends towards a juridical model seeing sin as moral failure. For the former the Church is the hospital of souls, the arena of salvation where, through the grace of God, the faithful ascend from "glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18) into union with God in a joining together of grace and human volition. The choice offered to Adam and Eve remains our choice: to ascend to life or descend into corruption. For the latter, whether the Church is viewed as essential, important or arbitrary, the model of sin as moral failing rests on divine election and adherence to moral, ethical codes as both the cure for sin and guarantor of fidelity. Whether ecclesial authority or individual conscience imposes the code the result is the same.

Admittedly, the idea of salvation as process is not absent in the West. (One can call to mind the Western mystics and the Wesleyan movement as examples.) However, the underlying theological foundations of Eastern Church and Western Church in regard to *ancestral* or *original* sin are dramatically opposed. The difference is apparent when looking at the understanding of ethics itself. For the Western Church ethics often seems to imply exclusively adherence to an external code; for the Eastern Church ethics implies "the restoration of life to the fullness of freedom and love" (Yannaras, 1984, p. 143).

Modern psychology has encouraged most Christian caregivers to view sin as illness so that, in practice, the juridical approach is often mitigated. The willingness to refer to mental health providers when necessary implies an expansion of the definition of sin from moral infraction to human condition. This is a happy development. Recognizing sin as disease helps us to understand that the problem of the human condition operates on many levels and may even have a genetic

component. It is interesting that Christians from a broad spectrum have rediscovered the psychology of spiritual writers of the ancient Church.

Sin as *missing the mark* or, put another way, as the failure to realize the full potential of the gift of human life, calls for a gradual approach to pastoral care. The goal is nothing less than an existential transformation from within through growth in communion with God. Daily sins are more than moral infractions; they are revelations of the brokenness of human life and evidence of personal struggle. "Repentance means rejecting death and uniting ourselves to life" (Yannaras, 1984, 147-148).

In the Eastern Church we tend to dwell on the process and the goal more than the sin. A wise Serbian Orthodox priest once commented that God is more concerned about the direction of our lives than He is about the specifics. Indeed, the Scriptures point to the wondrous truth that, "If thou, O God, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand, but with Thee there is forgiveness" (Psalm 130:3-4). The way is open for all who desire to take it. A young monk was once asked, "What do you do all day in the monastery?" He replied, "We fall and rise, fall and rise."

The sacramental approach in the Eastern Church is an integral part of pastoral care. The therapeutic view frees the sacrament of Confession in the Eastern Church from the tendency to take on a juridical character resulting in proscribed, impersonal penances. In Eastern theology sacraments are seen as a means of revealing the truth about humanity and also about God (Yannaras, 1984, p. 143). After Holy Baptism we often fail in our work of fulfilling the vocation to unbury the image within. *Seventy times seven* we return to the sacrament not as an *easy way out* (confess today, sin tomorrow), but because humility is a hard lesson to learn, real transformation is not instantaneous and we are in need of God's help. Healing takes time. Sacraments are far from magical or automatic rituals (Yannaras, 1984, p. 144). They are personal, grace-filled events in which our free response to God's grace is acknowledged and sanctified. Even in evangelical circles where Confession as sacrament is rejected the altar call often plays a similar role. It is telling that the Eastern Sacrament of Confession always takes place face to face and never in the kind of confessional that appeared in the West. Sin is personal and healing must be equally personal. Therefore nothing in authentic pastoral care can be impersonal, automatic or pre-planned. In Eastern Christianity the prescription is tailored for the patient as he or she *is*, not as he or she *ought* to be.

The juridical approach that has predominated in the West can make pastoral practice seem cold and automatic. Neither a focus on good works nor faith alone are enough to transform the human heart. Do positive, external criteria signify inner transformation in all cases? Some branches of Christian counseling too often rely on the application of seemingly relevant verses of Scripture to effect changes in behavior as if convincing one of the truth of Holy Scripture is enough. Belief in Scripture may be a beginning, but real transformation is not just a matter of thinking. First and foremost it is a matter of an existential transformation. It is a matter of a shift in the very mode of life itself: from autonomy to communion.

Death has caused a change in the way we relate to God, to one another and to the world. Our lives are dominated by the struggle to survive. Yannaras writes that we see ourselves not as *persons* sharing a common nature and purpose, but as autonomous *individuals* who live to survive in competition with one another. Thus, set adrift by death, we are alienated from God, from others and also from our true selves

(Yannaras, 1984). The Lord Jesus speaks to this saying, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:26). Salvation is a transformation from the tragic state of alienation and autonomy that ends in death into a state of communion with God and one another that ends in eternal life. So, in the Eastern Church's view, a transformation in this mode of existence must occur. If the chosen are saved by decree and not by choice such an emphasis is irrelevant. The courtroom seems insufficient as an arena for healing or transformation.

Great flexibility needs to exist in pastoral care if it is to promote authentic transformation. We need to take people as *they are* and not as they ought to be. Moral and ethical codes are references, certainly, but not ends in themselves. As a pastor entrusted with personal knowledge of people's lives, I know that moving people from point A to Z is impossible. If, by the grace of God, step B can be discovered, then real progress can often be made. Every step is a real step. If we can be faithful in small things the Lord will grant us bigger ones later (Matthew 25:21). There need be no rush in this intimate process of real transformation that has no end.

What this divine/human relationship will produce God knows, but we place ourselves in His loving hands and not without some trepidation because "God is a loving fire... for all: good or bad." (Kalomiris, 1980, p. 19) The knowledge that salvation is a process makes our failures understandable. The illness that afflicts us demands access to the grace of God often and repeatedly. We offer to Him the only things that we have, our weakened condition and will. Joined with God's love and grace it is the fuel that breathed upon by the Spirit of God, breaks the soul into flame. Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said: Abba, as much as I am able I practice a small rule, a little fasting, some prayer and meditation, and remain quiet, and as much as possible keep my thoughts clean. What else should I do? Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands toward heaven, and his fingers became like ten torches of flame. And he said: If you wish you can become all flame. (Nomura, 2001, p. 92)

As we have seen, for the early Church Fathers and the Eastern Church the At-one-ment is much more than a divine exercise in jurisprudence; it is the event of the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God that sets us free from the Ancestral Sin and its effects. Our slavery to death, sin, corruption and the devil are destroyed through the Cross and Resurrection and our hopeless adventure in autonomy is revealed to be what it is: a dead end. Salvation is much more than a verdict from above; it is an endless process of transformation from autonomy to communion, a gradual ascent from glory to glory as we take up once again our original vocation now fulfilled in Christ. The way to the Tree of Life at long last revealed to be the Cross is reopened and its fruit, the Body and Blood of God, offered to all. The goal is far greater than a change in behavior; we are meant to become divine.