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CAC Daily Meditations



What Do We Do with Sin?

What About Original Sin?

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Father Richard shares his understanding of original sin:

The “image of God” in us is absolute and unchanging. It’s pure and total gift, given equally to all. But this picture was complicated when the concept of original sin entered the Christian mind.

In this idea—first put forth by Augustine in the fifth century but never mentioned in the Bible—we emphasized that human beings were born into “sin” because Adam and Eve “offended God” by eating from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” As punishment, God cast them out of the garden of Eden. Original sin wasn’t something we did at all; it was something that was *done to us* (passed down from Adam and Eve). In this understanding, we’re all off to a bad start.

By contrast, most of the world’s great religions start with some sense of primal goodness in their creation stories. The Jewish and Christian traditions beautifully succeeded at this, with the Genesis record telling us that God called creation “good” five times in Genesis 1:10–25, and even “very good” in 1:31.

But after Augustine, most Christian theologies shifted from the positive vision of Genesis 1 to the more negative vision of Genesis 3—the so-called fall, or what I am calling the “problem.” Instead of embracing God’s master plan for humanity and creation—what we Franciscans still call the “Primacy of Christ”—Christians shrunk our image of both Jesus and Christ. Our “Savior” became a mere Johnny-come-lately “answer” to the problem of sin, a problem that we had largely created ourselves.

In one way, the doctrine of “original sin” was good and helpful in that it taught us not to be surprised at the frailty and woundedness that we all carry. Just as goodness is inherent and shared, so it seems with evil. This is, in fact, a very merciful teaching. Knowledge of our shared wound ought to free us from the burden of unnecessary and individual guilt or shame and help us to be forgiving and compassionate with ourselves and one another.

Yet historically speaking, the teaching of original sin started us off on the wrong foot—with a no instead of a yes, with mistrust instead of trust. We have spent centuries trying to solve the “problem” that we’re told is at the heart of our humanity. But if we start with a problem, we tend to never get beyond that mindset.

To begin climbing out of the hole of original sin, we must start with a positive and generous cosmic vision. Generosity tends to build on itself. *I have never met a truly compassionate or loving human being who did not have a foundational and even deep trust in the inherent goodness of human nature.*

The Christian story line must start with a positive and overarching vision for humanity and for history, or it will never get beyond the primitive, exclusionary, and fear-based stages of most early human development. We are ready for a major course correction.