

SIN AND GRACE

One of these weeks we'll get back to the reflections on the New Roman Missal, but for now, since it's Lent.....

With Fr. Tom Dore giving the homilies at all the Masses last weekend, I wasn't able to preach on what I think is one of the more significant Old Testament readings of Lent. If you recall, we heard what's known as the second account of Creation from chapter two of Genesis, followed by the lengthier account of the Fall of our "first parents." That "fall" is what we call "original sin" and it's been a dominant theme in theology ever since St. Paul expounded on it at length in his Letter to the Church in Rome – our second reading last Sunday – and especially since St. Augustine made such a big deal about it in his writings. But it's important to understand what's really happening in this fall from grace and to put it in perspective in relation to the whole Creation account.

The most common misunderstanding about original sin is that it's all about disobedience. To be sure, the story tells us that God forbade the eating of the "fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden", and that order was flouted at the instigation of Satan, the "serpent." But as is the case with many sins, the real sin wasn't the **action** of eating a pomegranate (yes, that was most likely the "fruit" the author had in mind), but rather the **motivation**; and that motivation was pride, along with the desire to be self-sufficient. After all what was the serpent's promise? "The moment you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods..." Think about it: if we're "like gods" why do we need God? The "original", ultimate temptation for human beings is to think that we can make it on our own, that we don't really need God or, for that matter, anyone else.

We say that, in Baptism, original sin is washed away. Well, that doesn't take place through some spiritual scrubbing of the soul (an image many of us grew up with) but rather through the intimate relationship with God that is made explicit in the sacrament. I say "made explicit" because we are, in fact, God's children from the moment of conception; Baptism affirms and ratifies that truth. But beyond that, Baptism "washes away" the pride that can be rooted in human nature by affirming the relationship we have with our sisters and brothers in the community of the Church, the healthy dependence we have on one another to support us on our pilgrim journey in this world.

And there's one final and profoundly important truth that is often lost in our focus on original sin, and that is "original grace." It's only in the last half century or so that theologians have focused on the fact that grace, not sin, is the "original" condition of humankind. We were, after all, created in the "image and likeness" of God, "little less than the angels", with God breathing into our nostrils "the breath of life" – **God's** life! Our personal goal in this life, as well as the goal of all creation, is to return to that "original grace" that the Garden of Eden metaphor envisions, where we live in perfect harmony with one another and with a true and humble dependence on the Creator who is the source of all we have and all that we are. The great 20th century anthropologist and theologian, Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, saw this return to "original grace" as an inevitable spiritual evolution which will culminate in the triumphant return of Jesus at the end of time, and that can't be sidetracked or overcome by sin, original or otherwise.

As we move through this season of Lent when we're challenged to acknowledge the reality of sin in our lives and the ever-present need for repentance, it's equally important to acknowledge the **grace** of God that is always at work in our lives, calling us back to the Garden and to the "original grace" of our baptism.

Fr. Bob