



# *Apostles for Today*

*Prayer and Reflection - November 2015*

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## *Original Sin and the need for God's Mercy*

On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2015, marking the second anniversary of his pontificate, Pope Francis announced an extraordinary jubilee, a Holy Year of Mercy. Pope Francis says the Holy Year is “dedicated to living out in our daily lives the mercy” which God “constantly extends to all of us.” He explained that the year would begin on 8<sup>th</sup> December to commemorate both the feast of the Immaculate Conception and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, which called the Church to proclaim the Gospel to the world in new ways, bringing God’s mercy to everyone.

With this issue of ‘Apostles for Today’ we are beginning a series of reflections on Mercy, Pallotti and the Pallottine Charism using Pope Francis’ Bull of Indiction, *Misericordiae Vultus*, as a starting point. The theme we deal with in the present issue is the fact of original sin and the need of everyone for the mercy of God.

Scripture and Tradition tell us that “God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gn 1:27). The first human being, Adam, was created in the state of original justice, i.e., with intellect and will totally submitted to God through sanctifying grace,<sup>1</sup> and with his imaginative and emotional life submitted to his intellect and will. Because of this profound harmony with God’s plan of love at the level of his moral and spiritual life, his body was under the control and at the service of his soul, his relationships with others were rooted completely in love and respect, and even the external universe was subject to him. This divine ordering of his life in all of its various dimensions was, as it were, the overflow of the subjection of his mind and will to God through sanctifying grace. When this grace was lost through sin, then all of these other dimensions of life no longer remained subject to God’s love. Each faculty now spontaneously sought its own fulfilment

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<sup>1</sup> Sanctifying grace is “a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love”, cf. CCC (Catechism of the Catholic Church) 2000.

without reference to any higher good. This condition of existence, which Adam passed on to his descendants, is not merely a state of simple lacking (*negatio*), but is a state of privation (*privatio*)<sup>2</sup> - the privation of original justice through which is taken away the subjection of the human mind to God as a result of no longer possessing that right relationship to God which human beings were meant to have from the beginning. This is the state of original sin.

Original sin is a condition, not something that people do; it is the normal spiritual and psychological condition of human beings, not their bad thoughts and actions. How do we verify the effect of original sin in life today? It is an undisputed fact that there is an inner quest in human beings for more. It is a God-given longing which is behind every comprehension, discovery and progress. Obtaining that which is longed for creates further desire for more and more. The desire for more in itself is not bad when it is oriented positively. However, when it is oriented towards fulfilling some desires that do not produce positive results, it can lead to a loss of freedom, addiction and slavery. Such strong desires can overwhelm those caught up in them, depriving them of self-control and the capacity to think and act rationally. Alcoholism, addiction to drugs and sex, various abuses, etc., are but a few examples of the inordinate yielding to what enslaves a person. Original sin thus becomes the tendency for human beings to 'give in' when tempted by the prevailing evils of the society around them, rather than standing up for good, and it helps explain why each individual finds temptation so hard to resist. As St. Paul puts it, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate..." (Rom 7:15).

God had created us to enjoy freedom and to make decisions that further our living in freedom. The loss of freedom which one suffers from such inordinate yielding is the effect of original sin. Original sin affects individuals by separating them from God, and bringing dissatisfaction and guilt into their lives. On a world scale, original sin explains such things as genocide, war, cruelty, exploitation and abuse, and the presence and universality of sin in human history. The stain of original sin is inherited by all humans at the moment of conception and brings its effects of ignorance, concupiscence,<sup>3</sup> death and suffering (Gn 3:16-19; CCC 1264). Through

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<sup>2</sup> *Negatio* here involves the simple fact of something being absent, whereas *privatio* involves the want of something that should have been there according to the Divine plan, in this case, the want of perfect union and conformity with God.

<sup>3</sup> An inclination towards sin and evil (cf. CCC 405, 418).

original sin, we have lost the hope of receiving the kingdom of God upon natural death. Original sin has separated human beings from God and has weakened our will to prefer good over evil.

In response, God, who has enduring love for all Creation (Ps 136:4-6), offers His divine mercy, comforting us in our suffering and forgiving our sins. God proclaims to Moses that He is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:5-6; CCC 210). He “so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16; cf. OCCC XIII, 121-122). Contemplating the merciful initiative of God, St. Vincent Pallotti exclaims, “O infinite love! O infinite Mercy, O abyss of ineffable miracle of mercy!” (OCCC X, 479). In a fervent prayer, he adds, “My God, my infinite mercy, by Your infinite mercy ... I firmly believe that through the infinite merits of the death of Jesus Christ ... my inconceivable unworthiness is destroyed ... and the defects of my life are wiped out ... to sing for ever as reward the wonders and depth of the Divine mercy and the infinite mercy of God” (OCCC X, 350-352).

Jesus Christ, Son of God, true God and true man, surrendered himself to an undeserved death and became the sacrifice for our sins. The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus was offered once and for all for the sins of all humankind, so that we can be saved by the grace of God. “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, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all.” (Rm 5:17-18). St. Paul’s letter to the Romans tells us that by Adam’s sin all were convicted, and now Christ’s obedience and passion redeem all. The redemption of Jesus Christ is God’s act of mercy, a gift to the world for the expiation of original sin and personal sins. “Christ the new Adam...fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his lofty calling,” and does it “in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love.” (GS 22). “Man and man’s lofty calling are revealed in Christ through the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love” (*Dives in misericordia* 1).

God could have certainly found another way to redeem us. But he chose this way to show how much he loves us. However, the grace offered and the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ at the objective level needs to be appropriated by faith at the personal level by each individual.

Faith is openness to God, an attitude of confidence in him and in his saving power. It is basically a gift. God has not only given us this great gift of faith, he has also shown us his forbearance. No matter what our sins may be, he is always eager to show mercy and forgive us. However, we have to make a firm decision to repent and embrace conversion. We are free to welcome God's mercy and make choices in keeping with this faith-life because God respects human freedom.

God created us perfect to enjoy paradise. But by allowing Adam to use his free will and freedom to sin, God gives us something even better, redemption by the blood of His only Son. Jesus Christ has redeemed us from original sin and all the personal sins committed by each one of us, so that, as St. Paul puts it "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rm 5:20). The paradise that God created for human beings was good, but our reward for "fighting the good fight" (1Tim 6:12) is even better. At the Easter vigil, the Church joyfully sings "O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!"

### **Reflection:**

1. How do I react to the affirmation of St. Paul, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rm 3:23)?
2. What effects of original sin do I experience in my personal life?
3. How should I use God's mercy as a pattern in my life (cf. Mic 6:8: what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God)?

### **Prayer:**

*Father in heaven, I know that I am weak; I have yielded myself to the evil inclinations that overwhelm me. I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am sincerely sorry and I ask your forgiveness. I am in need of your mercy. May the blood of Jesus wash away my sins. I submit myself into his hands. From now on may His life be my life and may He become the Lord of my life. Pour out your Spirit into my heart that He may help me to obey you and to do your will.*

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