

Newman on the Doctrine of Original Sin

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In this article I explore Newman's theological understanding of the human person and the doctrine of original sin. The concept of sin plays a dominant role in Newman's theological anthropology. He argues that human beings are slaves to sin and are in need of God's mercy. He describes sin as a pestilence and disease which robs us of our spiritual life. Original sin is an indifference to the very work of God's grace within us and as such strikes at the very core of our being.

Newman's understanding of the doctrine of original sin admits monogenesis which passes on the fallen state of human beings to descendants of Adam. For Newman the sin of Adam and Eve was different in degree from any subsequent personal sin that we can commit as individuals. Original sin encompasses both the original sin of Adam and Eve and the state of corruption into which all subsequent generations are born. The personal sins of future generations are conditioned by the milieu of original sin and they resemble original sin insofar as they contribute to the overall sinfulness of humanity.

The Doctrine of Original Sin

In his work on method Bernard Lonergan speaks of the normative function of doctrine which he claims addresses the alienation and divergence within the community.¹ Lonergan's thought dovetails and supports Newman's insights on the doctrine of original sin. In one of his sections on doctrine Lonergan explains that human beings often lack the words for expressing who they really are and so they will adopt the language of the group with which they associate. Lonergan claims that there is a deterioration of the language and the doctrine it conveys.² The unconverted individual will be appropriated into the class of "believers." Any conflicts of interest between the assimilating parties will be set aside. As a result an unauthentic tradition can develop which can only be escaped by a purging of what was once pure.

Lonergan offers hope for such digression through the normative

function of doctrines. The doctrines serve to point out the truth and error of the human condition. The discriminating capacity of doctrines point to the sinfulness that results from the lack of conversion. The normative function also alerts the unconverted as well as the fallen away to the need for illumination and guidance.

The normative function of the doctrine of original sin identifies for both the believer and the unconverted that there is something lacking in themselves and that they need both illumination and guidance. An important passage I wish to examine concerning original sin and its meaning reflects Newman's belief that the doctrine of original sin is first a mystery but that its existence is a reality. In the *Apologia* Newman addresses the "doctrine of what is theologically called original sin" (Apo. 243).³ Newman begins with the certainty of the existence of God and looks out at the world. Newman is distressed at what he sees and feels it undercuts what he initially claims to be certain. The world offers "no reflexion of its Creator" (Apo. 242). This observation is consistent with Lonergan's recognition of the melting pot that develops between the converted and unconverted. Newman simply recognizes that were it not for his conscience and heart he would be "an atheist, or a pantheist or a polytheist" (Apo. 241) when he looked into the world. The world Newman observed is one which covers over embarrassing conflicts between converted and unconverted. Newman asks us to consider the innumerable aspects of the human condition and to recognize its senseless nature.

Newman can offer only two possibilities: Either there is no God or the mass of humanity has abandoned His presence. Newman knows that his heart and mind are certain God exists and therefore "the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity" (Apo. 187). Thus Newman is convinced of the doctrine of original sin.

In his article on "Original Sin" found in *Sacramentum Mundi*,⁴ Karl Rahner offers contemporary insight which sheds light on Newman's thought. Rahner begins by describing a threefold misunderstanding which the doctrine of original sin meets with today. First, the doctrine of original sin contradicts the more pervasive sentiment of today which believes human beings, by their very nature and essence, are good. The evil in the world is understood as a byproduct or cost of civilization. Secondly, others consider original sin as a very part of human nature which is impossible to overcome. It really has no historical grounding and is simply a precondition of human existence. Rahner comments in his *Foundations* that the historical aspect of salvation must never be left out of humanity's story.⁵ Lastly, others speak of original sin in a univocal way with personal sin. Rahner concludes that this state of

affairs makes it easy to understand—though not excuse—why the doctrine of original sin plays a very small role for modern Christianity.

Newman, however, does not succumb to any of these pitfalls. He states clearly that human beings are not by nature corrupt or reprobate, but that through an historical event their existence was tainted with corruption and they lost the gifts which raised them above their basic nature, the most important of these gifts being the divine indwelling. The modern claims of initial soundness and wholeness are actually an affirmation of Newman's recognition that human beings are reluctant to state their dependence on God.

As to Rahner's second point, Newman is clear that original sin is only sin in an analogous way. Briefly stated, Newman's argument resembles Rahner's: original sin, like personal sin, is a condition which ought not to exist. It runs contrary to the will of God and is in that sense "sin". This discussion also applies to Rahner's last point on the univocal use of original and personal sin. It is evident from Newman's argument that he does not use them in the same way. The corruption that results from original sin, though real, is not the choice of a given individual. The personal sin of each individual, though conditioned by the reality of original sin, remains the responsibility of the individual and cannot be mitigated by claims of predisposition to sin.

Lastly, Newman does not try to avoid the difficulties inherent in the doctrine of original sin. He clearly states in "Righteousness Not of Us, But in Us" that the doctrine of original sin is at the foundation of all teaching about the way of salvation. Yet, it must be admitted that in his zeal for emphasizing the doctrine of original corruption, Newman downplays the fact that original sin cannot be understood as more prevalent than the effects of Christian redemption. However, it would be unfair to claim that the significance of Christ's redemption is overlooked. This theme is found in all his works. It permeates all of them. Yet, there remains a strong Calvinistic strain which continues to stress the reality of sin. It is clear that for Newman the effects of original sin are of tragic proportions. In his work, *The Spiritual Legacy of Newman*, William Lamm⁶ treats some of Newman's thought on sin under the heading of hypocrisy. Lamm claims that Newman treats the mystery of original sin at greater length than any other spiritual writer of latter times such as Cardinal Henry Edward Manning (1808–1892) or Thomas Arnold (1795–1842) who offers no serious treatment of this theme even in his discussion of the failure of the Church in his works on Church reforms. Lamm attributes it to the surge of Pelagianism in the period. The doctrine of original sin is for Newman the fundamental truth of religion (See PS, i, 87, 167;⁷ VM, ii, 110⁸). Those who do not confess

this truth are in for a rude awakening. In addition, original sin is the source of concupiscence, which is one of the primary hindrances that Christians encounter on the road to holiness. Many defects flow from concupiscence. For Newman the word hypocrisy sums up the compilation of these threats.

Hypocrisy is a serious word. We are accustomed to consider the hypocrite as...of very rare occurrence.... That (hypocrisy) is an uncommon sin is not true, as a little examination will show us. (PS, i, 124)

It is important however to understand what Newman means by hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is not used in the sense which most individuals would use it today. A hypocrite is not a rare occurrence. Newman does not include those who deceive others while not deceiving themselves as hypocrites. Newman's definition of a hypocrite is threefold. First, hypocrisy is the deceiving of others as well as the deception of the self. Second, it is a deceit towards God, and at the same time a deception of the self. Third, it is a self-deception, which attempts to force oneself into a religious frame of mind without due preparation (PS, i, 127; PS, v, 240; PS, v, 338; PS, v, 224). Such deception has concrete and difficult effects for there are real attitudes and consequences that develop from original sin.

Meaning and Consequences of Original Sin

Newman's understanding of original sin grows clearer when one examines some of his other statements on original sin. In a sermon taken from his *Parochial and Plain Sermons* entitled "Righteousness Not of Us, But in Us" preached on Epiphany in 1840, Newman introduces us to the self-conceit of the Corinthians who abused the spiritual gifts which were given them. They forgot that these blessings were not theirs by right, but by God's favor. This discussion eventually leads to Newman's reminder that without Christ, human beings can do nothing; without Christ the division between human beings and God is impossible to bridge.

This is that great truth which is at the foundation of all true doctrine as to the way of salvation.... the doctrine of original corruption and helplessness; and, in consequence, of original guilt and sin. (PS, v, 134–135)

Human beings are utterly dependent on God especially for the removal of this sinful condition. Yet as Newman observes in this

sermon, human beings are most reluctant to confess this truth. They violated the primal relationship between themselves and the Supreme Being. This division between the divine person and human beings is evident in two ways: taking God for granted and denying human fallenness.

In 1832 Newman wrote on these particular aspects of sin. First, human beings take for granted God's favor and in the spirit of the Liberals, "they refer everything to system, and subject the provisions of God's free bounty to the laws of cause and effect" (PS, v, 135). Human beings too often make themselves the center of their own existence and separate themselves from God. For as Newman tells us in his sermon, "Sins of Ignorance and Weakness," most human beings will readily admit that they commit sins and are not perfect, but what they do not like to admit to is the fact that the descendants of Adam are a weak and broken people. They believe that should they choose, they could do the right thing. They refuse to confess that "they have the taint of corruption about all their doings and imaginings" (PS, i, 88). This, says Newman, is the sort of shame which every child of Adam must bear. Thus human beings are slow to admit their fallenness and subsequent dependence on God.

The previously mentioned denial of our dependence on God is one of the major consequences of the fall. Newman outlines other significant effects of the fall in "Wisdom as Contrasted with Faith and Bigotry" (1841) from his *Oxford University Sermons* where he states: "At the fall we did not become other beings than we had been, but forfeited gifts which had been added to us on our creation" (US, 281).⁹ He is consistent in the claim that human beings did not lose anything that was theirs by nature as he also states in his *Lectures on Justification*. He writes: "The principle of sanctity in Adam, to which was attached the gift of immortal life, was something distinct from and above his human nature" (Jfc., 159).¹⁰ What Adam did lose was a supernatural endowment which was nothing less than the indwelling of the Divine Word. Without the gift of this Divine Indwelling, humankind lost the source of its perfection. "When man was created, he was endowed with gifts above his own nature, by means of which that nature was perfected.... And when man fell, he lost this divine, unmerited gift" (Mix., 169).¹¹ Human beings had lost a "skin" of protection as well as a loss of "integrity."

Newman poetically describes the nature of this fall in the chorus of the demons in his work *The Dream of Gerontius*. He writes rhetorically:

Low-born clods
Of brute earth,
They aspire
To become gods,
By a new birth,
And an extra grace,
And a score of merits. (Ger. 44)¹².

The demons go on to chide human beings in the most discordant portion of the work. They have been “chucked down” from the place of the great spirits, the first possessors of the spiritual realm. Humans are forced to lick the dust under the feet of the despot of heaven or so say the demons. Such language reflects Newman’s strong belief in the destruction resulting from the fall.

In his work, *The White Stone* Vincent Ferrer Blehl comments on Newman’s thought on original sin. Blehl points out that Newman’s phenomenological approach to sin reveals an inner source of sin at the core of the human person’s existence.¹³ Selfknowledge provides the data for a plausible claim for the doctrine of original sin. Blehl points out that for Newman divine revelation is necessary to have knowledge of the doctrine of original sin. Nonetheless a human being will feel the tug of conscience warning him of a principle that contends with God’s will.

Blehl claims that in his sermons Newman did not explore the nature of original sin. He considers Newman vague in this regard concentrating instead on the effects of original sin. As a result, Blehl states that Newman avoids a distinction between “sin as an effect of original sin and original sin itself.”¹⁴ He focused on describing the evil principle within us from which sin arises.

These observations cloud Newman’s understanding of original sin, for in fairness to Newman it should be noted that he describes original sin as essentially a mystery. It is a critical part of God’s revelation though not by any means one that he willed. Newman describes it as one of the earliest mysteries, second only to creation. Blehl helps outline the consequences of the doctrine of original sin for Newman, but Newman recognizes it as more than just an evil principle. The doctrine, then, of original sin gives testimony to its reality and mystery. Newman is aware of the sinfulness in his own community and though he recognizes the doctrine of original sin is mysterious he also realizes that it addresses a concrete aspect of human existence. This is consistent with his notion of mystery and understanding. Newman wrote:

Now of the sins which stain us,... I must mention first original sin.
How it is that we are born under a curse which we did not bring
upon us, we do not know: it is a mystery. (PS, v, 212)

It is something gone wrong in the very fabric of creation and the principal tragedy of the human condition.

Newman's thought on original sin does more than just attempt to clarify one of the Church's most ancient teachings; it addresses the dynamic between doctrine and mystery, understanding and discovery. His approach was to maintain that the doctrine of original sin was capable of standing the test of time. He knew that it was difficult issue; it demanded some explanation, some clarification. Newman was convinced that the doctrine of original sin gave meaning and insight into the very questions it raises. The doctrine does not impose an unnatural condition on humanity. Rather, for Newman, it recognizes or perhaps diagnoses the ills and misfortunes of a fallen society which is in need of the Church for its improvement.

Newman recognized that the doctrine of original sin is conveyed in human language with certain ambiguities which limits full understanding. Nonetheless, the doctrine is capable of providing apprehension of the mysterious nature of the reality of original sin. The doctrine addresses not only men and women of faith but implicates the whole human race while simultaneously offering it the hope of salvation.

- 1 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 299.
- 2 Lonergan, *Method*, 299.
3. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, Green), 243 (Hereafter Apo. in text).
- 4 Karl Rahner, "Sin" in *Sacramentum Mundi* ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962), 87-94.
- 5 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 41.
- 6 William R. Lamm, *The Spiritual Legacy of Newman* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1934), 71.
- 7 John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons: Volumes 1-8* (Longmans, Green, 1910), i: 87, 167. (Hereafter PS).
- 8 John Henry Newman, *The Via Media* (Longmans, Green, 1899) ii: 124. (Hereafter VM).
- 9 John Henry Newman, *Oxford University Sermons* (Longmans, Green, 1900), 281. (Hereafter US).
- 10 John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification* (Longmans Green, 1914), 159. (Hereafter Jfc.).
- 11 John Henry Newman, *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (Longmans, Green, 1899), 169. (Hereafter Mix.)
- 12 John Henry Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius* (Longmans, Green, 1919), 44. (Hereafter Ger.).
- 13 Vincent Ferrer Blehl, *The White Stone: The Spiritual Theology of John Henry Newman* (Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's Publications), 49.
- 14 Blehl, *White Stone*. 49.