

# THE ORIGIN AND OVERCOMING OF EVIL

## *Original Sin and God's Suffering in Christianity*

Julio Terán Dutari

### 1. Articulating the Christian Statements

#### 1.0. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The statements of the Christian faith that we shall discuss philosophically in the second part, will be first exposed in an articulation corresponding to our particular theme. The contents will be taken from the present day Church's self-understanding; that is, we shall not merely take the text of Sacred Scripture according to one's own interpretation, nor shall we take the works of individual theologians or the witnesses of faith in the rich Christian tradition. With respect to confessional differences within Christianity, I have decided to present the viewpoint of the Roman Catholic Church, to which I belong and which I know the best. This will provide us with a basis and a framework for the exposition that will follow. Because we are searching for an updated and standard comprehension of the Catholic viewpoint, we will refer to the "Catechism of the Catholic Church."<sup>1</sup> Here in this Catechism are gathered into a corpus of four main parts, with continual references to Sacred Scripture, the most relevant texts of the Second Vatican Council, which are an updated and synthetic formulation of Church doctrine, together with other significant Conciliar texts, plus the testimony of the tradition of the Church fathers, theologians, and spiritual writers.

Certainly, we will carefully attempt to take into account the viewpoint of the other great Christian confessions, as far as this will be possible. Nevertheless, once in a while this theological synthesis of our theme may appear incomplete and very general for the faith-consciousness among the Christians in the particular Churches – even in the Catholic Church. In any case, I hope that at least this synthesis will not appear artificially arranged.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations will be taken from the volume *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (St. Paul's Books & Media, 1995). This English translation is based upon the original Latin text: *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997). In this paper our numbers, mostly in square brackets, refer to this same *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (henceforth abbreviated CCC). The quotations and references of the first part will often omit CCC.

Our study will proceed according to the exegetical principle that the revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament has to be seen as the center of all God's revelations; in such a way that the Old Testament is presupposed by the New Testament; but is also explained and completed by the New.

## 1.1. THE TESTIMONY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE ORIGIN OF EVIL IN THE DISOBEDIENCE OF THE CREATURE; THE PROMISE OF OVERCOMING EVIL IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

### *1.1.1. The creation of a developing and limited world with free creatures brings forth the presence of the physical and moral evil*

The so-called theodicy problem has become critical precisely for the Christian faith: "If God the Father almighty, the Creator of the ordered and good world, cares for all his creatures, why does evil exist?" [309]. "Why did God not create a world so perfect that no evil could exist in it?" [310].<sup>2</sup> The answer of the Church sees the existence of evil in connection with the developing character of the world. The Church distinguishes *physical evil* (the disappearance of certain forms of existence and the appearance of other less perfect forms) from *moral evil* (free deviation from the ultimate destiny, which is called sin<sup>3</sup>): "Angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice and preferential love. They can therefore go astray. Indeed, they have sinned." "God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil. He permits it, however, because he respects the freedom of his creatures." God even knows, in a mysterious way, how to bring a good from the consequences of an evil, even a moral evil, caused by his creatures; but for all that, evil never becomes a good [310-12].

### *1.1.2. The origin of evil is disclosed only with the light of faith in the love of the Creator and Savior*

The deepest insight into the origin of evil can only be gained by a conversion towards the living God, in the light of the 'mystery of the faith': "The revelation of divine love in Christ manifested at the same time the extent of evil and the superabundance of grace (Cf. Rom 5:20)" [385]. The Christian understanding of moral evil (in German, *das Böse*) as something that has its center in sin, presupposes faith in the deep connection between the created free human being and God as the Creator, a free and loving God, who gives to the rational human be-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. also CCC 385: "God is infinitely good and all his works are good. Yet no one can escape the experience of suffering or the evils in nature which seem to be linked to the limitations proper to creatures: and above all to the question of moral evil."

<sup>3</sup> Concerning the concept of sin, cf. "Sünde," in Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, eds., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 10 (Basel: Schwabe, 1998), cols. 598-615.

ing an interior destination toward the love for God and for one another. So sin appears as a refusal of God and his plan of salvation; and moral evil is unmasked as something worse than merely a developmental flaw, a psychological weakness, a mistake, or the necessary consequence of an inadequate social structure [386-87; cf. 1846-51]. But all this, which was already known by the people of God in the Old Testament through the revelation of Scripture, yields its ultimate meaning only in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who sends the Holy Spirit to "convict the world concerning sin" (Jn 16:8) [388].

*1.1.3. Evil begins with an original sin of the created freedom by the angels and the first parents of the human race*

"Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents" [390]. But behind that disobedient choice lurks a seductive voice opposed to God, which makes the human being fall into death out of envy: the voice of one of the fallen angels, one of those, who at the beginning were created good by God, but through their own doing, became evil because they sinned (cf. 2 Pet 2:4) [391]. Their 'original sin' consists in the fact that they radically and irrevocably rejected God and his reign. This is why the 'Devil' or 'Satan' is a "sinner from the beginning" (1 Jn 3:8), a "murderer from the beginning" and "the father of lies" (Jn 8,44) [392]. In both cases (that of the first parents and that of the fallen angels) the essence of sin appears as a failure in the test of freedom. And this, because God created free creatures in his image and oriented toward his friendship. The creature is dependent on God when using his freedom and is subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom [396].

*1.1.4. Evil works further in history, from the beginning and in all dimensions: as original sin, personal sin, and sin of the world; out of this arises a permanent spiritual battle*

When speaking of the initial 'falling into sin,'<sup>4</sup> the Church also speaks of 'original sin': "Although set by God in a state of rectitude, man, enticed by the evil one, abused his freedom at the very start of history. He lifted himself up against God and sought to attain his goal apart from him" [415].<sup>5</sup> Through their sin, the first parents lost the original holiness and justice they had received from God, not only for themselves but for all human beings [416]. Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called "origi-

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<sup>4</sup> Concerning this notion and also the concept of original sin, cf. "Sündenfall," in J. Ritter and K. Gründer, *op. cit.*, Vol. 10, cols. 616-18.

<sup>5</sup> The quotation is a formulation of Vatican Council II, GS 13,1.

nal sin" [417]. As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering [cf. 1521] and domination of death [399-400] and inclined to sin. This inclination is called "concupiscence" by the tradition [405-18]. The original sin is transmitted together with human nature – but not as personal fault – and it is proper to each individual person [419], until God redeems it, although the bad consequences persist [405]. Because of this continual influence of original sin [401-6], one can explain the increasing multiplicity of personal sins within humanity [1852-64] and also the spreading of evil ("sin creates a proclivity to sin" [1865]), including the social responsibility for the faults of others and even the 'sinful structures' of society, which are expressions and effects of personal sins [1865-69, cf. 845, 953]. So, the phrase "sin of the world" (John 1:29) can be understood finally as a summary of every evil, objectively and subjectively expressed [408, 1505]. This dramatic situation of the whole world, which is in "the power of the evil one," makes man's life a hard battle [409; 1426]. Furthermore, "the evil one," Satan, is active in this battle against God and his kingdom which is founded in Jesus Christ, in as much as he can bring "grave injuries of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature to each man and to society" [395; cf. 410]. Lastly, human persons could, through their free and definite choice, turn away from God and completely succumb to evil and forever be condemned [1033-37].

*1.1.5. Nevertheless, God seals from the beginning a covenant with humanity for the remission of sins, with the promise of a full triumph over evil in God's kingdom*

After the fall into sin, God lifted up humanity through the promise of redemption and raised once more the hope of salvation. Again and again, God offered his Covenant to man [55]. God, "in a mysterious way, heralds the coming victory over evil" [410]. Though "disfigured by sin and death, man remains 'in the image of God'" [705]. The promises already began at the time of the original fall [411] and were renewed many times; in a unique manner, they were addressed to Abraham and to his progeny and were confirmed through the progressive revelation of the covenant with the chosen people. In this way, God has awakened the hope of redemption from evil through a universal redeemer, and by his Spirit has kept alive the expectation for his kingdom [706-16; 56-63]. Through the prophets, God forms his people in the hope of a new and everlasting Covenant intended for all. They proclaim a radical redemption, purification of all their infidelities, a salvation that will include all the nations [64].

## 1.2. THE TESTIMONY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE OVERCOMING OF EVIL BY MEANS OF THE SACRIFICIAL SUFFERING OF JESUS CHRIST, THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT, WITH THE FAITHFUL MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH, FOR THE BUILDING UP OF GOD'S KINGDOM

### 1.2.1. *The Achievement of Jesus Christ*

1.2.1.1. *Through the Holy Spirit, God sent his Son in the person of Jesus Christ, as the Savior of all humanity, in order to fulfill the promise of salvation.* The Apostle Paul proclaims about Jesus: "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law"<sup>6</sup> (Gal 4:4-5) [422]. This happened through the Holy Spirit of God, who is sent by the Father for the mission of the Son [484-86]. This was proclaimed by the apostle Peter about Jesus of Nazareth: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16) [424]. The main task of the Messiah is this: to achieve the salvation of all mankind from the slavery of sin and evil, in order to inaugurate God's kingdom definitively [436]. When Jesus accepted Peter's confession of faith, he also announced his imminent passion and the fulfillment of his redemptive mission as the suffering Servant of God. But "only after his Resurrection will Peter be able to proclaim Jesus' messianic kingship"; hence, the true meaning of this kingship (and actually of all redemption) is revealed only when he is raised high on the cross [440]. In Jesus, whose name in Hebrew means "God saves," "God recapitulates all of his history of salvation on behalf of men" [430; cf. 2812].

1.2.1.2. *Through his life and his death on the cross, Jesus Christ freely takes upon himself the sin of the world and of the whole of humanity, he expiates this sin, and thus achieves the universal redemption from evil.* "Christ's whole life is a mystery of redemption. Redemption<sup>7</sup> comes to us above all through the blood of his cross, but this mystery is at work throughout Christ's entire life" [517]. Surely Christ's death has brought about redemption "from the transgressions under the first covenant" (Heb 9:15) [580], but also from those transgressions of all other sinners [605]. "By sending his own Son in the form of a slave, in the form of a fallen humanity, on account of sin, God 'made him to be sin who

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<sup>6</sup> Here we are dealing with the law of the Old Covenant: "According to Christian tradition, the Law is holy, spiritual, and good, yet still imperfect. Like a tutor it shows what must be done, but does not of itself give the strength, the grace of the Spirit, to fulfill it. Because of sin, which it cannot remove, it remains a law of bondage. According to St. Paul, its special function is to denounce and disclose sin, which constitutes a 'law of concupiscence' in the human heart" [1963; cf. 587-92].

<sup>7</sup> Concerning the meaning of the New Testament concept of 'Redemption' and its additional use in theology and philosophy, cf. "Erlösung," in J. Ritter, ed., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), cols. 717-19.

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