

RCIA CLASS 4 – THE GOODNESS OF CREATION, THE GLORY OF HUMAN NATURE AND THE TRAGEDY OF ORIGINAL SIN

I. The Bible makes it clear that God made all of creation naturally good and then entrusted this world to us and to the angels. The material world is meant to be perfected by humanity and ultimately by prayer. It is sin, from human and angels, that brought evil into the world.

A. Genesis 1 contains the creation account that uses a seven day structure to emphasize the order and goodness of creation and the omnipotence and goodness of God, with creation pointing to man, and man to the worship of God.

1. The neat seven-day structure provides an orderly notion of creation, with the first three days creating a background, or a home, and the second three days filling the home with life.

a. God creates the light and darkness on the first day; and, on the fourth day, He orders the light by making the sun, the moon, and the stars, which rule and populate the day and night.

b. On the second day, God makes the "waters above," the "waters below," and the space between them, that is, the oceans, space, and the air. On the fifth day, He fills the waters and air with fish and birds.

c. God makes the earth and vegetation on the third day. And, on the sixth day, He fills the earth with animals and then creates man, giving him authority over this earth and the animals.

d. As then-Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out in In the Beginning (1986), the seventh day, the Sabbath, holds everything together, pointing out the centrality of prayer.

2. After every day, except the second, God declares what He has made to be good, and after all the days, everything is "very good." There is an emphasis that all things were created good. Contrary to the Gnostics and the pagan literature, the Bible affirms that all things, especially human nature, are essentially good, and are only corrupted by the sin of angels and men. (The omission of any statement of the second day could be due to the fact that the waters below were separated from the waters above, this earth from heaven, and this separation was not entirely good.)

3. In verses 26 and 27, God creates man and woman in His image and likeness. Man and woman are distinct, but related, reflecting God's image together. The classic way that the Church Fathers used to interpret this notion is that human nature was and is in God's image, although now the image is obscured by sin. For, like God, we can know the truth, love the good, admire the beautiful, and seek the holy in prayer. However, sin for a time eliminated the likeness of God that we had and destroyed the primordial order. By Baptism, we are restored to that likeness and made children of God.

4. In verses 28-30, God gives man dominion over the earth and the animals. There is a balanced teaching here. On the one hand, contrary to pagans, old and new, the Bible does affirm that man is greater than nature and that nature is made for man. However, the Bible also affirms that we have a responsibility to God to care for His trust given to us. As Pope Benedict said in Caritas in Veritate 49 "In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it."

5. We can see the dramatic message of Genesis 1 when comparing it to the Babylonian creation myth described in the Enuma Elish, which was discovered in the 19th century. That myth has a seven-day structure that is remarkably similar to Genesis 1, but with a completely different vision of the gods and man.
 - a. In that myth, one set of gods led by Marduk overthrows and kills against the goddess Tiamet, who is his mother, and who represents primordial chaos. Out Tiamet's body and blood, Marduk and his allies make the earth and man over the course of six days, with the seventh day one of feasting. They create man because they will be more at ease if we serve them.
 - b. That myth indicates that strife and evil are mixed with good at the very core of creation, that creation came through a number of gods, none of whom are all-powerful or all-good, and that the gods created us that we

may make their life easier by being their servants. The message of Genesis is radically different, indicating goodness and order at the core, one almighty God, and creation out of sheer goodness. We now can add that, far from God creating us to make His life easier, His Son suffered on the Cross for us.

6. It has been debated from the beginning of the Church whether the seven days in Genesis 1 were meant as seven 24 hour time periods, or symbolically. St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-220) in his Miscellanis, St. Augustine (354-430) , in the final part of his Confessions and Origin (185-254) in De Principis book IV, read them to be symbolic, with St. Augustine saying that they reflect the order in which creation was revealed to the angels, and Origin saying that they are a seven-fold reflection of the mystery of God. By contrast, St. Basil the Great (320-379) and St. Ephraim (306-373) thought that the days were meant as time periods. St. Thomas Aquinas considered both views and thought it unnecessary to decide between them. See Summa Theologica, Part I, question 74, articles 1-2.

B. The Bible then goes on to elaborate on the fact that there is even now a wisdom and order in creation, despite its flaws.

1. The Wisdom literature of the Bible goes on to describe God's creation of all things as good, and Wisdom, portrayed as a glorious woman, entrusted with fashioning all things. See, e.g., Wis. 1:13-15, 7:21-8:1, 9:9; Prov. 8:22-31; Sir. 24:1-12.
2. The Gospel according to John and the letters of St. Paul likewise present Jesus, the Word of God, as the source and summation of all creation, emphasizing its natural goodness and God's concern for all things. See John. 1:3, 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16.
3. The Book of Revelation, building on the prophesies of Isaiah, speaks of the new heavens and new earth that God will bring about when earth is completed and purified of the evils that currently afflict her. Is. 65:17, 66:22; Rev. 21:1; see also Rom. 8:18-22.

4. The Psalms call upon all of creation to praise God, indicating their natural orientation to the glory of God. See, e.g., Ps. 19:1-7, 29:1-2; 148:1-12; see also Dan. 3:62-81. Catholic spirituality has emphasized this point, calling upon people to see the glory of God in creation. See, e.g., St. Francis, Canticle of the Creatures; poetry of Gerald Manly Hopkins.

C. The Church thus affirms this fundamental goodness of creation as a reflection of the better things of eternal life.

1. Especially in the first three centuries the Church had to battle the Gnostic tendencies from Hellenistic culture, which denied the goodness of created things, instead assigning them to a lesser god, who is either evil, or at least flawed. One can see in the letters of St. John an early refutation of this heresy with his insistence that Jesus Christ is God truly come as a human being. See 1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7.

2. The Church thus teaches that actions in this world are good, although limited. However, when joined to the love of God, they take on an eternal significance, and will be restored and glorified one day in the new heavens and new earth. See, e.g., Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes (1965) 38.

II. God also created the angelic realm, with angels as pure spirits who chose once for all for or against God.

A. An angel is a pure spirit created to glorify God forever in heaven.

1. The term angel (*aggelos* in Greek, *angelus* in Latin) means messenger, for the angels described in the Bible are mostly, although not exclusively, messengers and guardians from God. See, e.g., Gen. 19, 22:11; Judges 6:11-24; 1 Kings 19:5; Zech. 1:7-17; Matt. 1:20, 2:19; Luke 1:10-20, 26-38; Heb. 2:2.

2. They have such a magnificence and power that, in the Bible, when people realize that they have seen an angel, they believe that they will die from the glory of it. See, e.g., Judges 6:22, 13:22; Tob. 12:16; Dan. 9:17-19. For the angels are so close to God, when people in the Bible see them, they describe the occasion as seeing the Lord. See, e.g., Gen. 16:13,

32:30; Ex. 3:2-6. St. John was even tempted to give an angel the worship due to God. See Rev. 19:10, 22:9-10. As a result, among the first words an angel addresses to a human are frequently, "Be not afraid." See, e.g., Luke 1:13, 2:10.

3. Angels, although they guard and guide us, are dangerous if approached without the proper respect. See, e.g., Gen. 19:11; Ex. 23:20-27; Num. 22:22-35; 2 Pet. 2:10-12. The Book of Revelation thus describes them as both: (1) guiding and guarding God's people, especially in their worship, but also (2) announcing God's wrath upon the world. See, e.g., Rev. 7:1-8, 8:3-10:11, 16:1-21.

B. When angels were created, they had one choice, for or against God. They were so close to God that that one choice was final, for never-ending glory or never-ending shame.

1. The angels who chose to serve God became what we call angels and praise Him forever in heaven in magnificent splendor beyond the ability of human words to describe. See Catechism 329-35.

2. The spirits who chose against God became what we call demons and, in their hatred for God and us, they seek to turn as many people against God as possible. There is a continuing battle between the angels and demons, which will end only in the final consummation of all things on this earth, when Christ appears with His angels to judge all people and nations. See Matt. 25:14-46; Rev. 20-22.

II. The Bible and Church teaching affirm that man was created naturally good, joining the spiritual and material realms. But human nature is now in a fallen state because of sinfulness. The grace of Christ brings us into a glorified state, now freed from original sin, but afflicted with the effects of original sins, such as weakness of will, difficulty in prayer, and subjection to death.

A. As stated above, the creation account in Genesis 1 describes, not only the goodness of this realm in general, but also says man and woman are created in the image of God and given authority over this world.

B. The creation account in Genesis 2 makes the same point, here emphasizing man as a combination of material and spirit, the primordial state as one of harmony, and the complementarity of male and female at the beginning.

1. This creation account describes the creation of man first, whom God makes from the clay of the earth (representing our earthiness) and His breath (or spirit), representing our divine calling. There is a refutation of either the idea that we are

really just material, or the idea that our souls are merely imprisoned in the body. Body and soul are naturally joined together from the beginning.

2. God creates an idyllic garden (paradise in Greek) with trees, including the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the latter of which becomes a temptation. Noteworthy, even the tempting tree of knowledge is created by God, for things become evil only when we put them to an evil use. The tree of life, meant plainly for man, contrasts with the branch of life in the Epic of Gilgamesh, in which Gilgamesh finds a plant that will give immortality, only to have it snatched away by a large snake, indicating the pagans' belief that immortality is not for man. The message of Genesis is very different. Man was created for life; death came because of sin.

3. God gives Adam, whose name means "man," a wide variety of trees to eat from, representing God's desire that we be happy even on this earth. The prohibition is only over one tree, which gives "knowledge of good and evil." Knowledge in ancient Hebrew was not merely abstract knowledge, but personal experience. God does not want us to experience evil, which will bring death.
 - The tree of life would be taken away after the Fall, but is now restored by the Cross.

4. Genesis 2 expressly describes the first marriage of Adam and Eve at the beginning.
 - a. Adam needs Eve, whose name means "mother," because he is alone. He has God, the angels, and the animals, but that is not enough, but he needs to love one like himself. In a similar fashion, we learn and express the love of God by love of one like ourselves.

 - b. Adam names the animals and presumably relates to Eve what God has told him. Eve brings Adam out of loneliness and teaches him how to love. There is a complementarity of male and female here. Adam brings structure and order; naming things and receiving instructions is natural to him. He becomes a father later. Eve, by contrast, senses love first, and order later. She is named a mother in chapter 3, verse 20, before she even has children. Eve, like women generally, senses a call to maternity very naturally; men tend more to sense a

call to paternity by experience.

5. The first marriage is there at the beginning, ordering the rest of creation. God created only three institutions, marriage, the ancient country of Israel, and the Church. Humans created all other institutions, and can change their natures; but these three institutions are from God Himself, and therefore not subject to human change.

B. Having described creation as good, the Bible then addresses the question of how evil came into the world. Chapter 3, building on the themes of the garden and the trees in chapter 2, addresses this question.

1. The serpent shows up as the cleverest of all animals. This serpent would come to be understood as a symbol, and perhaps the material disguise, of Satan, the leader of the fallen angels. Adam and Eve are innocent, but are clearly not forced into sin; they receive a temptation and choose how to respond. In our fallen state, the devil can tempt us in more ways, but we even now are never forced to sin. As indicated in the Book of Revelation, this serpent is not a small snake but a dragon and thus potentially terrible and threatening, which partially explains why Adam does not challenge him. See Rev. 12. But he is also seductive and persuasive; he would probably rather use deception, but would likely have resorted to threats in the end.

2. The serpent tempts Eve and then Adam in a way that is typical of all temptation.

- First, the serpent distorts God's commandment, asking whether God forbade eating the fruit of any of the trees, which suggests that God did not want Adam and Eve to enjoy anything. It is classic of tempters to misconstrue God's commandments making them seem more difficult than they are.

- Second, Eve (and the silent or absent Adam) do not turn to God in prayer at this time of temptation, but instead rely on their own power.

- Third, the serpent maligns God's intentions, saying the God really just wanted to keep Adam and Eve ignorant and less than they could be. He does not present one bit of evidence for this contention, and in fact it does not make any sense, for God could have just as easily not put the tree there in the first place. But tempters rarely use clear

reasoning.

- Fourth, the serpent appeals to her pride, which is the root of all evils; he awakens in Adam and Eve a desire to be like God in deciding what is good and what is evil.

- Fifth, the fruit of the tree appeals to Eve in three classic ways: it is good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. There is an appeal to sensual desire, the attractiveness of worldly beauty, and intellectual vanity. Sense pleasure, false beauty, and vanity are ever sources of temptation.

- Once Eve falls, Adam simply goes with the flow. His sin comes largely from a lack of courage. First, he fails to help Eve by confronting the serpent. Second, he fails to defend the truth, simply letting Eve make a choice without a guiding hand. And third, once she falls, he refuses to try to get her to repent or even to resist, but instead goes along with her. The desire to be like everybody else is a final means that tempters use.

3. After the fall, Adam and Eve are then ashamed to be with God. It is a common trick of the devil to persuade a person that a sin is minor before the fact, but then after the sin, to use a sense of shame to keep the person from turning back to God.

- Even after the sin is clear, God gives Adam and Eve the first opportunity to speak. Their excuses are not actual lies, but they are rather irrelevant and evade the real issue, their free choice to sin.

4. God then doles out the punishments, but before the humans are punished, there is a note of hope.

a. God first punishes the serpent in two ways: (1) by making him crawl on the ground and eat dirt; and (2) by the promise that his head will be crushed by the woman or her offspring.

- The punishment of crawling on the ground, on one level, has the literal meaning that snakes, a symbol of the devil, crawl, rather than walk, as perhaps ancestors of snakes did, and certainly as mythical dragons would. At a deeper level, the devil's abilities are limited precisely because of man's reduced ability to access the spiritual realms; his main attack will now have to be concentrated at a lower level.

- The punishment of war between the serpent and the woman and his offspring and hers implies defeat for the serpent, for he can strike only at the heel, while the woman and her offspring strike at his head. We can now see the fulfillment of this punishment in the devil's temporary ability to crucify Jesus Christ in the physical body, but Jesus' final triumph over the devil.

- It is noteworthy that the punishment of the serpent, and the implication of final victory over him, is placed before the punishment of Adam and Eve. God's saving power is greater than the punishment that comes from His justice.

b. God then punishes the woman in two related ways, pain in childbirth (representing the difficulty of raising children generally) and pain in relations with men. This punishment reflects one of the central effects of original sin, the divisions and strife between people, especially within the family. This punishment also affects men, but since women are often more concerned with domestic harmony, this punishment is more expressly given to Eve.

c. God punishes Adam in three related ways: (1) work will be more toilsome; (2) the earth will no longer obey him; and (3) he will die. Once again, women also suffer from these things as well. However, men often desire more deeply the accomplishment in making things, and thus frustration in work and weakness leading to death is generally more difficult to take.

C. Thus, we have a great glory, are gravely flawed by original sin, but are redeemed by Christ and have a great glory that comes from Him.

1. We are in the image of God, for we can love the good, know the truth, appreciate the beautiful, and ascend to God in holiness.

a. We can love the good in God, in each other and in all creation. Seeking this goodness is at the essence of the call to love, which gives freedom its final purpose.

b. Love, however, depends upon truth, for we cannot seek the good if we do not know what the good is. Thus, we

are endowed with an intellect to know the truth. All truth finds its source in God Himself. Love and truth go together, for love, as Pope Benedict points out in Caritas in Veritate, "Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love."

- c. The good is naturally attractive, and true beauty is the natural attractiveness of the truth. There is a splendor to truth, which we as humans learn more and more to perceive and express. The Psalms express this beauty of the truth. E.g., Ps. 19:11, 27:4. Pope John Paul II made this point in his 1996 letter to artists, saying "In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty." He quotes Plato, "The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful."
 - d. Finally, there is the call to the holy, to that union with God in the celestial realms. The delight at prayer, the call to a higher realm, that soaring of the Spirit to God are part of this universal call to holiness. As St. Augustine wrote in his autobiography Confessions, "You made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."
2. Thus, even after the Fall, the Bible declares man to have a vast glory beyond imagining. See, e.g., Ps. 8:3-10; Wis. 8:27, 9:2. The prophets spoke of a day when all people would be able to be filled with the Spirit and know God personally. See, e.g., Joel 3:1-2; Ez. 36:24-28; Jer. 31:31-34. That day would be filled at Pentecost. See Acts 2:1-41.
 3. However, we also know that human nature is gravely flawed by what we call original sin. This original sin is the break from God caused by the sin of our first parents. It in turn causes concupiscence, a weakness of will even when we know what is right, the difficulty of prayer and darkness of the intellect, especially about the most important

things, and a rupture in nature that causes nature to turn against us and in the end leads to death. See Catechism 402-09.

4. With that stain of sin, and with the personal sins we accumulate, we cannot of our own accord approach God. See, e.g., Ps. 14:1-3; Rom. 3:9-20. Thus we stand in need of a Savior, who is Jesus, God and Man.