

The Origin of Sin, Part 1

For anything we encounter, the mind naturally wants to know who, how, why, and what it is. Take a statue, for example; we look at it and ask: what is it? (maybe it represents Mary); then we want to know what it is made of (maybe glass), and then why was it made (its purpose) and finally who made it. Only when, we have the answers to each of these questions, are we satisfied that we know what we have encountered. The ancients formulated this in terms of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. Naturally, the mind wonders at these same questions when encountering life itself and its various aspects, including good and evil. How did evil enter the world? Did God create evil? Is evil some eternal being, equal in power to good? If evil came from being tempted, what is the nature of temptation, how can I recognize it? To answer these questions, we have to go back to the beginning: the Book of Genesis. Very practical wisdom and understanding can be gleaned from examination of this passage, wisdom which is needed to navigate this world and this life.

1. The Serpent

One of the central characters in this Scriptural passage is the serpent. The Church Fathers are in uniform agreement that this is Satan himself, it is the devil himself who tempts Eve (recall the words of Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical on Scripture: “it is permitted to no one to interpret Holy Scripture...against the unanimous agreement of the [Church] Fathers.”). Furthermore, Revelation 20:2 specifically identifies “the ancient serpent” as the devil. Most importantly, however, the Church verifies that it is, in fact, the devil that tempts Eve (CCC 397). So it is the devil himself, but clearly the form of a serpent has significance, it carries a message. What is it?

Let us approach this question of: the meaning of the form of a serpent from several directions, starting with what a serpent generally represents in Scripture. In fact, ‘serpent’ actually carries a number of seemingly contrasting characteristics in Scripture, including: wise, cunning, subtle, rebellious, dangerous, sharp-tongued, deceitful, poisonous, painful (fiery) bites. Wise is certainly a good characteristic but the rest of what ‘serpent’ implies is evil. How can these characteristics be put together so as to understand the reason Satan is presented in the form of a serpent? We can do so as follows: the serpent is indeed “wise” but it is a sagacity divorced from obedience or submission to God; such a “wisdom” degenerates into cunning and subtlety which then gives rise to danger, deceit, poison, etc., which fits this passage, the nature of the tempter, quite well. The terms serpent and subtle are directly linked in this passage (he was the most subtle of the creatures that the Lord God had made). Bear in mind that subtle does not mean small or inconsequential, it means hard to notice, something that easily escapes notice.

Let us next consider the actual characteristics of snakes. One secular source states that: “Snakes are great at camouflaging themselves...They are difficult to see because most snakes are ‘sit and wait’ predators but also because they have great markings to help them hide from predators and prey.” Even in the most literal characteristics of the snake, then, we see disguise and camouflage. The serpent strikes suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere, with quickness and accuracy. This is telling us the nature of temptation. Are we too smart or too good or too something to take note? Do I have enough humility to know that this applies to me as well? If not, I am already dying from the bite...although it’s not too late to take the medicine for it.

One last aspect of note here is that the serpent was one of the “wild creature[s]” that the Lord God had made. Is evil (or the devil) a self-existent being, as powerful as God, contrary to and independent of him? No, he was created by the *Lord* God and is subject to God. The demons were created as good angels, with intellect and free-will, and chose to rebel against God.

By simply using the word serpent, then, our good Creator is trying to keep us safe by teaching us much about the nature of the one who seeks our destruction, and thus how to recognize and guard against that which can only bring misery and death. The tempter is subtle, clever, very good at camouflaging or hiding (which he uses for both for self-preservation and attack), he sits and waits – looking for the near occasion of sin, we often don’t see it coming, and he brings nothing, *nothing*, but pain, misery, and death. How often we see these characteristics in Scripture and in everyday life. One example is the ‘victimhood’ ploy. This is part of both

self-preservation (inducing the sympathy of others) as well as attack. It is common in the area of sexuality today: when the Church teaches what God has revealed, those who oppose often cry victim. Of course, make no mistake, there are real victims in life, the first and foremost one being our Lord Himself. But this is also part of the clever and subtle ploy, part of hiding, part of the camouflage – to use real victims for their own gain. This has to be one of the most hideous things that can be done to real victims – to use them for my own ends. But again, we cannot just look ‘out there’ and point the finger at others. We must examine ourselves as well. Are there times when I say to myself something along the lines of: I’ve had a hard life, therefore: I’m entitled, I’m righteous, and so on. If so, it is as plain as the nose on our face that we are playing the devil’s game. Do others try this with us, perhaps trying to goad us to act against God’s will? If so, I cannot accept it. This is not so uncommon. It happens in every walk of life – certainly in business and other more impersonal relations, but sadly, at times, even in family and parish life. Let’s be careful to: 1) decide not to do this ourselves, and 2) not allow ourselves to be ruled by it when others do it us.

St Paul reiterates and summarizes these characteristics of the tempter (and thus of temptation) by saying: the angel of darkness comes disguised as an angel of light. If we really think about this, we might say: well how can I possibly protect myself? Even in the best of circumstances (in the Garden of Eden where there were no physical threats or needs and with a clear intellect, strong will, and passions that were rightly ordered) man was overcome by the tempter. The angelic intellect is far greater than the human intellect, how can I possibly get through? The answer is: on your own, you cannot. This is why our good Father tells us, through His servant Paul: put on the full armor of God. The serpent cannot bite through that armor. We have said often enough how this armor is put in: study of the faith, personal prayer (including Adoration), the sacraments (including frequent Confession), living the faith in everyday life. I want to reiterate here: husbands and fathers, learn a lesson from Adam – it is your duty to lead your family in the life of faith, to see to it that they put on the full armor of God and failure to do so has grave consequences. Failure to do so is turning your family over to the ancient serpent. And you cannot lead your family into it without doing it yourself.

2. Naked and Subtle

Before moving on to the “conversation” between Eve and the serpent, which is the brunt of this Scriptural passage, we will note one more thing that will be helpful in understanding the nature of that temptation. Just prior to the account of The Fall, Scripture says that Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. Using the ancient Hebrew, a number of Scripture scholars have pointed out a connection that Scripture is making between ‘naked’ and ‘subtle.’ One scholar notes that the Hebrew word used for naked *here* is different than the word used for naked in other parts of Scripture. The Hebrew term used for naked here is: arum-min, and the word used for subtle is arum – hence the connection. The word ‘naked’ carries with it the meaning (or connotation) of: dependence. The implication here is that Adam & Eve were dependent on God, and were unashamed of that dependence. This will be the point of attack of the tempter – to make them ashamed of this dependence. Is this, alone, not something we could use for our own meditation and self-examination? Do I yield to temptation because I want to pridefully assert that I am dependent on no one? Does this float around in the back of my mind? Don’t be afraid to explore this and acknowledge it to whatever extent it is there – that’s how we become better, that’s part of how we put on the full armor of God.

I will plan continue this contemplation of the Scriptural account of The Fall next week, starting with the conversation between the serpent and Eve.

God bless you,

Fr Kuhn.