REPLACING ORIGINAL SIN WITH PRAYERFUL HOPE AS CATHOLIC THEOLOGY’S RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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By

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ABSTRACT

The theological problem of evil poses a substantial challenge to all monotheistic faith traditions. In Roman Catholic theology, the primary response to the problem of evil is the doctrine of original sin. According to this doctrine, human suffering is attributable to a putatively historical event: The first people, Adam and Eve, introduced disorder into creation by disobeying a divine command. This disorder transformed human existence from a state of “original justice,” in which humanity experienced neither death nor suffering, to a state of original sin, in which each person is inclined toward sinful activity and vulnerable to harm. The state of original sin is transmitted from parent to child at conception, and, although baptism erases the metaphysical taint of Adam and Eve’s deed, the concrete effects of original sin are permanent, subjecting each person to a lifetime of moral error, physical hardship, and certain death.

In the thesis that follows, I demonstrate that the doctrine of original sin is theologically deficient, that it conflicts with other Church teachings, and that it inflicts harm on both the faith community and the Church itself. As a result, I argue that the Church should cease employing original sin in response to the problem of evil. In place of original sin, I propose adopting a theological concept that I entitle “prayerful hope.”
This concept — which is derived from the Church’s recent reanalysis of the doctrine of limbo — argues that those who suffer should challenge God through prayer to end their suffering, and the Church should explain to the faithful that there is good reason to believe that such prayers will be answered. I demonstrate that this teaching would correct the theological errors that pervade the doctrine of original sin, would be consistent with all major Church doctrines, and would take a significant step toward ameliorating the damage that original sin has wreaked on the Church and its followers. I conclude by demonstrating that the Church could replace original sin with prayerful hope at little cost to the Church’s magisterial authority, and I recommend a specific procedure for effecting this long overdue theological change.
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This thesis is dedicated to those who suffer.
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INTRODUCTION

The inability to understand “original sin” and to make it understandable is really one of the most difficult problems of present-day theology and pastoral ministry. — Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, The Ratzinger Report

“The problem of evil” is an unfortunate euphemism, a misnomer with a long history of unhappy effects. The name suggests a dilemma to be resolved or a conflict to be settled. The problem of evil, however, is not a dilemma, but a paradox: It is the irreconcilable contradiction between the simultaneous existence of earthly suffering and an omnipotent, benevolent deity. As such, it resides at the core of human self-contemplation, inextricably intertwined with the ultimate questions of our creation, existence, and death.

The problem of evil is the great puzzle of theology, and it has been studied for so long and with such fervent intensity that scholars’ continuing ability to produce new thoughts on the subject is, perhaps above all else, a striking testament to human ingenuity. Many analyses of the problem of evil, however, are of dubious practicality. A great many of them are devoted simply to rehashing traditional arguments — theodicies that have remained essentially unchanged for centuries. There is, by now, little more to be said in their defense. Anti-religionist critiques do not fare any better; using the problem of evil to highlight certain logical flaws in the dogmas of Christianity and other monotheistic faith traditions is a well-worn path. Though the sheer quantity
of material on each side of this ancient and unsolvable debate is staggering,\(^1\) the ideas therein have grown stagnant.

In recent years, however, two movements have arisen in the study of the problem of evil, each with the potential to generate genuinely new and practical approaches to the issue. The first movement comprises those who examine the problem of evil in light of developments in non-theological fields, such as biology or physics.\(^2\) While this would be an unremarkable development in many academic areas — where external developments have been incorporated, to varying degrees, for decades or centuries — the analysis of the problem of evil had proven largely resistant to such efforts. This resistance seems now to have weakened, and important, relevant schools of thought that theodicists have long neglected are finally being brought to bear on the problem.

The second movement — perhaps too small as yet to warrant that term — takes a substantially different approach. These scholars have suggested that the entire endeavor of theodicy should be abandoned, not simply because the problem of evil cannot be solved, but also because the development, propagation, and substance of

\(^1\) One bibliography of writings regarding the problem of evil contains 4,237 references, which averages to roughly three new works per week, every week, for thirty years. Barry L. Whitney, Theodicy: An Annotated Bibliography on the Problem of Evil, 1960-1990 (New York: Garland, 1993).

theodicies themselves have negative effects on the faith community. In other words, they argue that the solution does more harm that the problem.

In the thesis that follows, I seek primarily to add to the latter category of scholarship. Specifically, I examine the doctrine of original sin, which is the Roman Catholic Church’s primary theological response to the problem of evil. I argue that original sin, although it is a teaching of ancient pedigree and longstanding tradition, is irredeemably false, harmful to the faith of Catholics worldwide, and damaging to the Church itself. It relies on obsolete interpretations of scripture, conflicts with numerous other Church doctrines, is infused with centuries of misogyny, and seriously calls into question the authority and infallibility of the Church’s dogmatic pronouncements in general. These problems are not merely matters of how original sin is taught or explained; rather, they are inherent within the doctrine itself, and they are irresolvable. Because the doctrine cannot be repaired, I argue, it must be abandoned, and it should not be replaced by any other theodicy unless and until a more effective response to the problem of evil is developed.

I am not the first person to argue for doing away with original sin; Catholics and non-Catholics alike have long noted the many problems that pervade the doctrine. But a recent development within the Church has the potential to fundamentally alter the course of this debate: The Church, perhaps unintentionally, appears to have laid the

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groundwork for a new teaching regarding the problem of evil that would be vastly superior to any theodicy and that may prove uniquely useful in beginning the Church’s transition away from original sin.

The new teaching appears in *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*, a document that the Church’s International Theological Commission published, with papal approval, in 2007. This pronouncement addressed a theological subset of the problem of evil: What happens to babies who, tragically, die before they can be baptized? In response, the ITC invoked a concept that I call “prayerful hope,” which explicitly acknowledged that the Church did not know the answer to the question, but nonetheless encouraged the faithful to be optimistic that prayers for the salvation of unbaptized children are answered.

I believe that this teaching can be applied the problem of evil as a whole. Specifically, the Church can DISCLAIM the knowledge of any answer to the problem, while still encouraging Catholics to confront the mystery and the reality of suffering in the context of prayer and realistic hope for Christian salvation. This is not merely a theological platitude designed to comfort the masses, nor does it perpetuate any of the flaws of the original sin doctrine. Original sin posits a demonstrably false theory regarding the origin of evil, while prayerful hope concedes the undeniable mystery thereof. Original sin hurtfully blames those who suffer for helping to cause their own suffering.

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suffering, while prayerful hope directs them to the potential for joyous salvation. Original sin raises doubts as to the legitimacy of the Church’s teaching authority, while prayerful hope rests on theological precepts that are essentially beyond doubt. In short, prayerful hope is truthful and intellectually coherent, and it would provide the faith community with the necessary tools to confront suffering as it happens — all of which would represent enormous improvements over the Church’s current teaching.

Chapter 1 of this thesis defines the problem of evil, explaining the fundamental logical paradox that arises from the reality of evil and the simultaneous existence of a benevolent, omnipotent God. Chapter 2 briefly sets forth the Church’s formal response to the problem, i.e., the doctrine of original sin. This chapter discusses the details of the current official doctrine, which may, in its medieval tone and questionable substance, come as a surprise to readers more acquainted with glossed-over, pastoral versions. Chapter 3 presents some of the most significant critiques of the original sin doctrine, including the ways in which it conflicts with other major Church dogmas, perpetuates longstanding untruths, and is offered, untenably, as an “answer” to the unanswerable problem of evil. Chapter 4 presents the alternative of prayerful hope, explains how it could be applied to the problem of evil, and shows why that application would be preferable to original sin. Finally, this thesis concludes that the Church realistically could supplant original sin with prayerful hope, over a reasonable period of time, without doing damage to the Church’s reliance on tradition or requiring massive doctrinal upheaval.
CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Among all the problems upon which the human intellect has tried its teeth, the
origin of evil is the most useless and hopeless.

— Ian Maclaren, The Mind of the Master

A. The Problem of Evil Defined

In its most succinct form, the problem of evil is a question: Why, if God is all-
good and all-powerful, does evil nonetheless exist? While useful as a starting point,
this formulation glosses over several analytically important considerations, and so a
slightly more detailed description is required to demonstrate the fundamental
theological paradox at issue. One of many such possible descriptions follows:

(1) By definition, God is omnipotent and purely benevolent.
(2) By definition, an omnipotent being is able to prevent evil.
(3) By definition, a benevolent being wishes to prevent evil.
(4) Therefore, God both wishes to prevent evil and is able to do so.
(5) Evil exists.

On the face of the problem, it appears that either (4) or (5) must be false. Yet God’s
omnipotence and benevolence are fundamental tenets of Catholicism, while (as

1. As the Catechism asks, “[i]f God the Father almighty, the Creator of the ordered and good
world, cares for all his creatures, why does evil exist? . . . [W]hy did God not create a world so perfect
that no evil could exist in it?” Catechism of the Catholic Church,
discussed further below) the reality of evil is an empirical fact explicitly affirmed by the contemporary Church. Accordingly, the revealed truths regarding God’s attributes conflict with logical and experiential truths regarding the state of the world. Thence arises the paradox.

Many theologians, having set out the formal problem of evil, proceed directly to proposing and/or debunking specific theodicies. But such an approach is unwise, for even a relatively straightforward phrasing of the problem, such as the ones above, contains significant ambiguities. Some of these must be resolved to ensure that all participants in the theological conversation are operating under the same understanding of what the problem is and what the goal of any response to it should be.

As a threshold matter, there is an underlying ambiguity that affects how the contradiction between God and evil is analyzed: The analysis depends on whether the contradiction is posed theologically — i.e., from within a faith tradition — or simply logically — i.e., from a perspective outside the tradition.² Within a faith tradition, the problem of evil is a theological conundrum, asking why evil exists despite God’s omnipotence and benevolence. This approach does not ask whether God is indeed omnipotent and benevolent (and certainly does not question whether God exists), but rather assumes so, and then seeks to understand the existence of evil accordingly. The ultimate goal of such theological analysis, therefore, is to show that the coexistence of God and evil is not a logical impossibility, so that it is reasonable for a rational person

² Tilley, 130-31, 226-27.
to believe in an omnipotent, benevolent God despite the existence of evil. And because it takes place within a faith tradition, this inquiry may be conducted not only through logic and empirical observations regarding the state of the world, but also through knowledge derived from scripture, to the extent such scripture and its employed interpretation hold authoritative value within the community.

From a vantage point outside a faith tradition, however, the problem of evil takes on different significance: Rather than a question of why things are the way they are, it becomes an issue of whether existence is the way that the paradox presumes. In other words, given that evil exists, is it possible for an omnipotent, benevolent God to also exist? Atheists and anti-religionists bring this challenge to monotheistic faiths on a regular basis.3 A full response to such a challenge would require more than the demonstration of the possible coexistence of God and evil that examination within a faith tradition requires. Instead, rebutting the anti-monotheistic use of the problem of evil requires a believer to show the actual existence of a benevolent and omnipotent God despite the existence of evil — undoubtedly an even more difficult task than the already impossible one faced by intra-tradition theodicists. Furthermore, such a

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response must be made without use of scripture as authority, given that scripture holds its authoritative value only within the faith community.4

Applying these distinct manifestations of the problem of evil to this thesis, the question becomes whether the Catholic Church’s response to the problem should be geared towards the Catholic community, thereby giving Catholics comfort that their faith is not illogical, or towards the world at large, thereby attempting to show the objective logicality of the Church’s teachings.5 The answer seems clear: On matters of dogma such as this, the Church’s responsibility is to its own community, to provide believers with a response to their most pressing metaphysical questions.6 The Church is under no obligation to (and, indeed, cannot) affirmatively prove the existence and characteristics of God to those who hold other metaphysical beliefs.7 If non-believers


5. Following Alvin Plantinga, some contemporary scholars refer to this as the distinction between a “defense of God,” which shows that it is logically possible for God to cause or allow evil, and a “theodicy,” which seeks to show why God actually causes or permits suffering. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975), 28-29; Tilley, 130-31, 221-27; Adams, 7-16. But given that the general definition of a theodicy is, literally, a “defense of God,” and it has been described as such since the Enlightenment, I find Plantinga’s terminology confusingly redundant rather than helpful.

6. “The aim of a Christian theodicy must . . . be the relatively modest and defensive one of showing that the mystery of evil, largely incomprehensible though it remains, does not tender irrational [Christian] faith . . . .” John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 245. Here and throughout this thesis, I distinguish between “responses” and “answers” to the problem of evil. There are many possible responses to the problem; there is no answer.

find the response convincing, so much the better, but this should not be the primary goal of revising the Church’s teachings regarding the origins of evil.

Accordingly, for purposes of this thesis, I critique and suggest improvements to the Church’s response to the problem of evil as that response is directed towards members of the Catholic faith community, with the goal of providing a response that is logically sound, pastorally useful, and consistent with other Church teachings. I presuppose the existence, omnipotence, and benevolence of God, and I recognize appeals to scripture as valid sources of authority, provided that the scripture is correctly interpreted.

B. Characteristics of God

The second source of potential ambiguity in the problem of evil is its description of God, specifically God’s omnipotence and benevolence.

The Church defines God’s omnipotence in the words of the Psalms: “He does whatever he pleases.”

8 Similarly, the *Catechism* states that “[n]othing is impossible with God, who disposes his works according to his will.”

9 God is, quite simply, capable of anything. The question that arises in the context of the problem of evil, however, is

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8. *Catechism*, 268; Ps. 115:3. Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references and quotations herein are to the New Revised Standard Version.

whether God’s omnipotence includes the ability to perform logically impossible tasks. In other words, is God’s omnipotence subject to the rules of rationality? Much has been written on this question; for example, the possibility of God’s creating such things as a “square circle” or “a cat that is also an elephant” has occupied the time and efforts of a disturbing number of theologians.10 As devoid of practical meaning as it may seem at first, this definitional issue does have the potential to affect the analysis of the problem of evil, for the problem is greatly simplified — indeed, it is eliminated — if one accepts as a premise that the rules of logic have no application when discussing God. Stated differently, if God’s omnipotence simply trumps the human concepts of contradiction and paradox, then there is no “problem” of evil, and therefore we need go no further.

The notion that God and God’s actions cannot be subjected to rational analysis, however, is alien to the Catholic tradition, in which the heart of theology is the application of human reason to what is known of the world and of God.11 Indeed, the entire concept of Catholic theological inquiry — *fides quaerens intellectum* — stands contrary to the contention that the Church should simply abdicate its responsibility to inquire, saying that God “does whatever he pleases” even if logical impossibilities


11. “[T]he rational expression of the knowledge of created and uncreated reality, is necessary to man, who is endowed with intellect.” *Catechism*, 2500; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.1.viii.
abound. Thus, if this thesis is to have any meaning, I must adopt the position that a logical impossibility is still an impossibility, regardless of God’s power; God’s omnipotence does not, in and of itself, resolve the apparent paradox of the problem of evil.

The second divine attribute at issue in the problem is God’s benevolence. The Church’s position on this attribute is significantly less clear than its view of omnipotence; theological discussions of benevolence tend to consist mainly of paeans to divine grace and love — overarching positivity with little practical utility. For example, the word “benevolent” and its variants appear only twice in the Catholic Catechism: once in a context not relevant here, and once in noting that God, “prior to any merit on our part . . . loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.”

This definition-by-example shows that the birth and death of Jesus manifest God’s

12. “The author of theodicy agrees that the case be tried before the tribunal of reason . . . . Therefore, he may not during the course of the process declare arbitrarily that the tribunal of human reason is incompetent. In other words, he must not use the fact that . . . the Creator has supreme wisdom to state then that all doubts raised against it must be immediately set aside without further examination as completely groundless.” Immanuel Kant, “On the Failure of All Attempted Philosophical Theodicies,” trans. Michael Despland, in Michael Despland, Kant on History and Religion (Montreal: Queen’s University Press, 1973), 283.

13. Similarly, while it is tempting to qualify or explain away God’s omnipotence to reach an answer to the problem of evil, doing so simply avoids the paradox, rather than responding to it. Such an approach also is impossible to reconcile with the Church’s clear and consistent conception of omnipotence. For these reasons, I do not discuss further herein the arguments of the process theologians and others who assert that God’s “omnipotence” is merely persuasive or otherwise effectively limited. David Ray Griffin, God, Evil, and Power: A Process Theodicy (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991); David Ray Griffin, Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsideration (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

benevolence,\textsuperscript{15} but, in the absence of any other example or discussion, it is difficult to extrapolate from this unique event to determine more broadly how God’s benevolence plays out in human history.\textsuperscript{16}

Such a lack of clarity is problematic for an inquiry into the problem of evil because many of the possible definitions of benevolence determine or presuppose the result of the inquiry. For example, benevolence might mean that God hates human suffering and would never cause a human being to suffer, in which case any analysis of the cause of evil should look to human or Satanic origins.\textsuperscript{17} Alternately, benevolence might mean that God would never cause a human being to suffer without having an ultimate, overriding redemptive purpose, in which case, an eschatological theodicy would be indicated.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a definition of benevolence that is both broad enough to avoid artificially constricting the discussion of the problem of evil, yet narrow enough to serve as a meaningful, functional definition.

I do not purport to have found the middle ground. However, one of the benefits of challenging the practice of theodicy in general is that, because I do not claim to know

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} “And in [the suffering of Jesus], love is manifested, the infinite love both of that only-begotten Son and of the Father who for this reason ‘gives’ his Son.” John Paul II, \textit{Salvifici Doloris} (1984), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris_en.html.

\item \textsuperscript{16} John Thiel argues that the resurrection indicates not that God is \textit{benevolent}, but that God is \textit{benevolence}. Thiel, 10-11. Marilyn McCord Adams sees in it two aspects of divine benevolence: “coercion,” i.e., compelling the surrender of evil, and “absorption,” i.e., enduring evil without losing integrity. Adams, 71-72.

\item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{Catechism}, 413.

\item \textsuperscript{18} Hick, \textit{Evil}, 110-11, 176-78; \textit{Catechism}, 420.
\end{itemize}
the answer to the problem of evil, I also do not need to exert great care in defining
benevolence precisely. Instead, it is sufficient to follow the lead of the Church by using
a vague definition, while accepting the paradoxical coexistence of benevolence and evil
as a given, i.e., presuming that God’s benevolence, however defined, is inconsistent
with human suffering. Thus, although I explain in chapter 3 why the doctrine of
original sin is inconsistent with even the Church’s amorphous definition of benevolence
as the trait that is epitomized by the crucifixion and resurrection, I do not rely on any
specific definition of God’s benevolence either to critique the doctrine of original sin or
to propose a replacement teaching.

C. Evil Defined

One of the most frequent failures in responses to the problem of evil is the use of
overly restrictive definitions of “evil.” In theology, as well as in common parlance,
evil is often conceived of simply as bad or immoral conduct. Such usage, however, is
grossly inadequate in the context of the problem of evil. Although the paradox of God
and evil does arise in the context of bad human acts that cause people to suffer, such
suffering is arguably the least theologically problematic type of evil, for, by definition,
there is always a moral agent other than God who can be blamed for it. The paradox is
far more stark in the context of experiences that lack any human cause but nonetheless


“[M]orally reprehensible[,] sinful, wicked . . . ; arising from actual or imputed bad character of conduct.”
Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. “Evil.”
lead to genuine misery, such as natural disasters, disease, or other suffering whose origin lacks moral agency. It is these situations in which God’s activity or inactivity vis-à-vis evil seems most problematic, both to the theologian and the believer. Thus, for purposes of the problem of evil, evil must include not just the ills that people inflict on others, but also all human suffering, regardless of its cause. This includes physical suffering, psychological suffering, and any other form of pain that a human being can experience, whether great or minor, universal or unique, grotesque or mundane. I therefore define “evil” to mean “human suffering,” and I use those terms interchangeably herein.

With evil so defined, it is analytically useful to consider evil as comprising three relatively distinct categories of suffering, as distinguished by the human and natural characteristics that make each one possible.

21. “In contemporary philosophical debates, ‘evil’ functions as an umbrella term that covers . . . all the minuses of life.” Adams, 2. “In the vocabulary of the Old Testament, suffering and evil are identified with each other.” John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris, 7. Salvifici Doloris provides a lengthy list of the types of suffering found in the Hebrew scriptures, many of which have nothing to do with bad acts:

the danger of death, the death of one’s own children and, especially, the death of the firstborn and only son; and then too: the lack of offspring, nostalgia for the homeland, persecution and hostility of the environment, mockery and scorn of the one who suffers, loneliness and abandonment; and again: the remorse of conscience, the difficulty of understanding why the wicked prosper and the just suffer, the unfaithfulness and ingratitude of friends and neighbours; and finally: the misfortunes of one’s own nation.

22. I recognize that there is real disagreement as to whether non-human suffering is an evil. Whitney, Theodicy, 144-54. I tend to agree with John Hick that the characteristics of such suffering are so fundamentally unknown to us that we cannot intelligently analyze them at all, much less incorporate them into our concept of evil. Hick, Evil, 103. Thus, I plead agnosticism as to the question of whether animals “suffer” like humans, and I exclude such potential suffering from my analysis because of its inherent uncertainty.

The first and most abstract category is “existential evil,” also known as “metaphysical evil.” This is the suffering that arises from the inherent limitations on human existence: It is “the evil of imperfection” or “the fact of finitude.”

Existential evil arises most notably from death — not from the act of dying per se (which may or may not be an evil, depending on the circumstances), but rather from the fear that accompanies the knowledge of the certainty of death. Although some few people do not experience this evil (e.g., the severely mentally handicapped, or infants who die before reaching the age of cognition), it is as close to universal as any aspect of the human condition can ever be. Such psychological suffering is a unique and

24. Tilley, 237. “[T]he experience of suffering or the evils in nature . . . seem to be linked to the limitations proper to creatures . . . .” *Catechism*, 385.


26. Adams, 37; Hick, *Evil*, 184-85. I recognize that many theologians speak of death as an evil per se, and that such an understanding has support in scripture, e.g., Rom. 6:23. This view, however, lacks precision. If evil is understood as synonymous with suffering, neither the act of dying nor the state of being dead is necessarily evil: The act of dying can be entirely devoid of suffering, and, in Christian soteriology, the afterlife is the antithesis of suffering, at least for some. Thus, the better view is that the suffering that accompanies death’s inevitability is an evil, as is any physical or mental pain experienced in dying, but death itself is merely an event, which may or may not be evil. Augustine espoused this view, “for death becomes evil only by the retribution which follows it.” Augustine, *City of God*, I.11, XIII.2 (“Of . . . bodily death, then, we may say that to the good it is good, and evil to the evil.”).

27. “Death enters our lives . . . whether through the death of someone close to us, through anonymous deaths for which we feel sympathy, or through the prospect of our own death. Death enters our lives . . . whether it comes as a terminal disease early in life, as the consequence of capricious or systemic violence, or as the inevitable end to the slow debilitation of old age.” Thiel, 90. Indeed, even the greatest of religious believers — those whose unyielding faith in the rewards of the afterlife might theoretically have rendered them immune to the fear of death — have confessed to apprehension regarding the inevitable extinguishing of their lives. For example, see Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta,”* Brian Kolodiejchuk, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2007); Benedict J. Groeschel, *Arise From Darkness: What to Do When Life Doesn’t Make Sense* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995). Augustine, too, recognized the universality of this fear. Augustine, *City of God*, XI.27.
important manifestation of evil that must be included in any discussion of the problem
of evil as a whole.

The second category of evil is moral evil, which is any suffering arising from
the intentional, reckless, or negligent actions of another person. Consistent with the
longstanding Judeo-Christian focus on rightness and wrongness in human activity, this
is the category to which the great majority of analyses of the problem of evil is
dedicated.\textsuperscript{28}

The Church teaches that moral evil is “incommensurably more harmful” than
any other form of evil.\textsuperscript{29} Yet despite (or, perhaps, because of) the unquestioned
importance of moral evil within Catholic theology, the boundaries of such evil are
frequently blurred. One particularly pervasive source of confusion concerns the
interplay between the theological categories of moral evil and sin: Although theodicists
usually conflate them, moral evil is not synonymous with sin. Sin is a transgression of
the divine will, either in the legal sense of violating an order (“You shall not make
wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God”), or in the more general sense of
failing to live up to the expectations God has set for humanity (“Love your neighbor as

\textsuperscript{28} For example, Whitney’s annotated bibliography of the problem of evil lists 349 works
concerning moral evil, versus 66 on natural evil. Whitney, \textit{Theodicy}, 21-80; Gabriel Daly, “Creation and
Original Sin,” in \textit{Commentary on the Catechism of the Catholic Church}, ed. Michael J. Walsh
(Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), 89.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Catechism}, 311. “[M]oral and spiritual evils . . . are above all others to be deprecated . . . .”
Augustine, \textit{City of God}, III.1; Thomas Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, trans. Jean Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN:
University of Notre Dame, 1995), 34-35.
Neither of these types of sins, however, is coterminous with evil as suffering. There are many divine commands that can be violated without causing suffering — blasphemy, for example, causes no harm to anyone — and a person’s failure to love all of humanity as much as possible, while arguably a sin of omission, does not necessarily cause any other person to suffer.

In defense of the commonplace conflation of moral evil and sin, some would argue that all sin is disobedience of God, and numerous scriptural references teach that such disobedience leads to suffering (i.e., evil) on the part of the sinner. But to accept the implication that sin equals suffering is to rule out any solution to the problem of evil other than holding God responsible. Using the same example from above, if a blasphemer were to suffer as a result of his blasphemy, this would be because God responded to the human act or, indistinguishably, created the world in such a way that it would respond automatically. In other words, if sin and suffering were truly

30. Ex. 20:7; Lev. 19:18; Mt. 19:19. Daly notes that theologians often find it “convenient” to blur the line between evil-as-wrongdoing and evil-as-suffering, even though these “belong to two heterogeneous categories.” G. Daly, 89.

31. Some might respond that the blasphemer “harms” God by using the divine name improperly, but, under the Catholic conception of God, it is impossible for a human to harm God in any real sense: “[T]o God no evils are hurtful . . . .” Augustine, City of God, XIII.3, V.10. “Sin does not affect God in himself . . . .” Wilfrid J. Harrington, The Tears of God: Our Benevolent Creator and Human Suffering (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 65; see note 13, above

32. E.g., Deut. 8:20; Jer. 6:19; Rom. 6:23. “[W]hen classical theologians turn to the problem of evil, they focus on the problem of sin and give suffering short shrift, quickly . . . numbering it among the punitive consequences of sin . . . .” Adams, 83.

33. The Augustinian tradition suggests that the natural world contains such a “retributive order.” Adams, 34. “[T]he order of the universe . . . requires that penalty should be dealt out to sinners. And so God is the author of the evil which is penalty, but not of the evil which is fault . . . .” Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I.49.i.
synonymous, it would only be because God chose to punish (or to create the world in a way that it would punish) all sinners, which would simply add another layer of impossibility onto the effort to reconcile divine benevolence and evil.\textsuperscript{34} A one-to-one correlation between sin and suffering would also be inconsistent with the conception of God as an active agent, for automatic punishment of all sinners would reduce God’s role to little more than the distributor of pre-determined consequences — a sort of divine “invisible fence” triggered by human trespasses. Furthermore, equivalence of sin and suffering is dubious as an empirical matter, given the general human experience that not all sinners appear to suffer for their sins, while some who suffer greatly appear relatively less sinful.\textsuperscript{35} In sum, \textit{sin} can coexist with an omnipotent, benevolent God and cause only minor philosophical concern, but \textit{suffering} necessarily conflicts with the existence of the God of Christianity. For all these reasons, it is important to maintain the distinction between sin and moral evil, with only the latter being relevant for purposes of the problem of evil.

In addition to this longstanding definitional problem, one contemporary source of debate regarding the identification of moral evil bears mention: how to assess institutional activity in the absence of any identifiable moral agent. Perhaps because of the historical conflation of sin and evil, the study of moral evil has long been focused on

\textsuperscript{34} This issue of suffering as punishment is one of the most fundamental problems with the doctrine of original sin, as discussed below in chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{35} “Unquestionably there is no justice here on earth. Monsters have fantastic success and no one suffers more than the saints.” Journet, 236; Hick, \textit{Evil}, 329-34. “In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.” Ecc. 7:15.
the acts and omissions of specific individuals or groups. But this is underinclusive, for it neglects moral evils that are inflicted by institutions and societal structures without being attributable to any particular persons. For example, assume for the sake of argument that the American system of employer-funded health insurance came about decades ago because well-meaning corporate and government officers believed — correctly at that time — that it was the best way to improve physical welfare of the largest possible proportion of Americans. Today, when someone finds herself, through a no-fault situation, unemployed and without insurance, any psychological stress she feels, such as constant fear of illness, is not attributable to the actions of an identifiable person or group. The suffering is, nonetheless, a moral evil, for it is the result of the cumulative actions of a society of people who, without any specific intent to do so, have created and maintained the system that directly led to the suffering. This type of institutional moral evil is important in the context of responding to the problem of evil, largely because religious institutions in particular have been charged with perpetrating it. Indeed, as discussed below, there is a strong argument to be made that certain longstanding theodicies are themselves institutional moral evils that should, therefore, be abandoned.


37. Tilley, 244-51.
The third and final category of evil is natural evil, which comprises all suffering that is neither existential nor moral evil. 38 The quintessential natural evil is a so-called “act of God,” such as a hurricane or earthquake. Because these “destructive forces of nature” 39 wreak such massive devastation and cause suffering so indiscriminately, 40 they are particularly challenging for theodists: Why would a benevolent, all-powerful God cause or permit a tsunami to kill hundreds of thousands of people? 41 Much has been written on the relationship between God and such cataclysms — deservedly so — but the massive horrors of the physical world should not obscure the more mundane natural evils experienced around the world every day. Any disease, from the common cold to depression to Alzheimer’s, is a source of genuine suffering. And each such occurrence is just as difficult to render consistent with God’s omnipotence and benevolence as is a full-scale natural disaster. Any divine responsibility (or lack

38. The Church sometimes refers to this as “physical evil.” Catechism, 310. I avoid that term because its implied omission of psychological suffering is inherently misleading.

39. Ibid.

40. “[O]ne cannot fail to notice the fact that this world, at some periods of time and in some eras of human existence, as it were becomes particularly concentrated. This happens, for example, in cases of natural disasters, epidemic[s], catastrophes, upheavals and . . . the scourge of famine.” John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris, 8.

41. The Asian tsunami of December 26, 2004, which killed over 200,000 people, has generated a significant amount of theological reflection. Gary Stern, Can God Intervene? How Religion Explains Natural Disasters (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007); David Bentley Hart, The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami? (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2005); Murphy, Russell, and Stoeger. Pope John Paul II’s public response to the tragedy, issued three days afterwards, was to ask “believers and people of good will to contribute generously to . . . the peoples who have already been harshly tried and are now exposed to the risk of epidemics.” John Paul II, General Audience, Dec. 29, 2004, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20041229_en.html.
thereof) for a city-leveling earthquake is the same as the divine responsibility (or lack thereof) for one person’s struggle with cancer.

Natural evil also includes pure accidents that result in suffering. Where one person suffers as a result of the unintentional and non-negligent actions of another, the absence of any moral actor necessarily excludes this suffering from the realm of moral evil. Stated differently, moral evil is found where someone acts negligently or with the intent to cause suffering, but pure accidents lack these characteristics and are therefore functionally indistinguishable (from the sufferer’s point of view) from natural disasters and other seemingly arbitrary causes of suffering. Accidental natural evils run the gamut from the mundane (e.g., stepping on someone’s toe) to the horrific, as in Marilyn McCord Adams’s example of a man who runs over his own child in his driveway.42

The three categories of evil provide a framework for a complete response to the problem of evil: The theodicist’s challenge is to explain each type of evil in a manner consistent with the attributes of God. The categories are not rigidly exclusive; in particular, natural and moral evil may somewhat overlap. For example, the uninsured person who becomes sick and cannot afford treatment experiences both moral evil (exclusion from necessary health care) and natural evil (the underlying illness). But it generally is not necessary to disentangle natural and moral evil in all their manifestations; for the most part, it is sufficient simply to recognize the potential

42. Adams, 28, 36.
overlap, provided that the relevant analysis of the problem of evil addresses both aspects of the suffering.

Before proceeding to discuss the Church’s response to evil, there is a final definitional issue that bears mention. Although the issue is largely a historical footnote at this point, it is necessary to note that all evil, regardless of the category into which it falls, shares two characteristics: It is real, and it is bad. This is contrary to classical Augustinian theodicies, which adopted a theory of evil as privatio boni — the absence of good.43 Augustine and his intellectual heirs argued against the reality of evil on the grounds that God is existence, and so all existence is good, meaning that evil cannot truly “exist” except as an absence of good.44 Furthermore, the argument goes, God draws good out of all evil, so not only does evil lack substance, but each apparent evil also ultimately results in good.45

43. “[E]vil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name evil.” Augustine, City of God, XI.9, XI.22. “Evil is not a thing.” Aquinas, On Evil, 4-6; Aquinas, Contra Gentiles, III.7-11; Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I.48-49; Anselm of Canterbury, Why God Became Man and the Virgin Conception and Original Sin, trans. Joseph M. Colleran (Albany: Magi Books, 1969), 177-78; Journet, 27-49.

44. Aquinas, Contra Gentiles, III.7.viii; Hick, Evil, 37-38, 47-48, 54-56; Adams, 42.

45. “For almighty God . . . , because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works if he were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself.” Augustine, The Enchiridion, trans. J. F. Shaw, in vol. 9 of The Works of Aurelius Augustine, ed. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1892), XI. “[Evils] are permitted to exist, for the sake of demonstrating how the most righteous foresight of God can make a good use even of them . . . .” Augustine, City of God, XIV.11, XI.17-18, XIII.4-5; Aquinas, Contra Gentiles, III.71. “Evils, in short, always provide the opportunity for some mysterious good.” Journet, 82-85, 148, 259. As an example, Journet cites the epidemics that killed a massive number of Native Americans during the colonial era: He argues that these deaths ultimately were not evil because they helped European missionaries gain more converts among the native population. Ibid., 280.
These hyper-technical claims, based in the categories of ancient philosophy, ignore the manifest reality of suffering: Whether evil has any “substance” is irrelevant to the one who suffers. The fear of death, for example, is not diminished by the philosophical proposition that such fear is merely the absence of non-fear. And as for the claim that all evil leads to some good, this is contrary to everyday experience, in which suffering both great and small occurs without any apparent benefit. Who gains when an elderly woman, living alone, falls and breaks her hip, lying on the floor for days until she dies? More fundamentally, even if it were true that evil leads to good, why would God not just bring the good into existence without the preceding evil? These experiential and theoretical problems are fatal to the old Augustinian definitions. Thus, although some vestiges of them remain in official doctrine, the Church is now adamant that “evil never becomes a good.”

Accordingly, before turning in full to the discussion of theological theories and abstract concepts, we reaffirm the terrible authenticity of suffering.


47. See pp. 59-63, below. David Burrell notes that the argument that “God’s ways are always just, despite appearances to the contrary” is a “familiar ploy of theodicy.” Burrell, 28.


49. *Catechism*, 311-12. “Faith gives us the certainty that God would not permit an evil if he did not cause a good to come from that very evil . . . .” Ibid., 324. “Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good.” John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 7.

50. *Catechism*, 312.
CHAPTER TWO

THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE: ORIGINAL SIN

’Twas snake that tempted mother Eve.
Because of snake we now believe
that, though depraved, we can be saved
from hellfire and damnation — because of snake's temptation.
— Richard Wilbur, *Candide*, “The Best of All Possible Worlds”

The Church’s formal response to the problem of evil is the doctrine of original sin, which teaches that suffering was introduced into an otherwise perfect creation by the first humans’ disobeying a divine command. In its full form, the doctrine of original sin is extraordinarily complicated, even by theological standards. This chapter traces the main themes of the doctrine, beginning with the Church’s understanding of the creation of the universe and continuing through its teachings regarding the relationship between original sin, suffering, and redemption.¹

First, however, a note on sources: In setting forth the Church’s position, I rely to some extent on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1992. I acknowledge that there is significant debate among theologians

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1. This thesis does not explore how the doctrine of original sin came about or how it reached its present form, topics about which much has been written. I recognize that there is significant debate regarding, for example, the extent to which Augustine’s writings may have been misinterpreted to support the doctrine, but little of this is relevant to judging the validity of original sin as it currently stands, nor is it likely to be of significance to the faith community. For an excellent recent historical analysis of the Church’s teachings on original sin, see Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002). An equally thorough and more traditional history is Henri Rondet, *Original Sin: The Patristic and Theological Background*, trans. Cajetan Finegan (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1972).
regarding the *Catechism* as a whole and some of its specific teachings, including those regarding the problem of evil,\(^2\) but there are several reasons why the *Catechism* is nonetheless worthy of the reliance I place on it. Most important, although scholars commonly cite the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, *inter alia*, for “official” Church doctrine, my thesis is intended to critique conceptions of *current* doctrine, not ancient or medieval ones. Merely citing a statement of a Doctor of the Church is insufficient for these purposes without extrinsic confirmation that the cited pronouncement remains authoritative — a problem that does not arise in discussing the 1992 *Catechism*.

The other alternative would be to rely on the writings of present-day theologians for the formal position of the Church, but this is also problematic. Citing the work of even highly traditional scholars as dogma can be misleading, for there are certain aspects of Church teachings that are important to this thesis but that contemporary theologians rarely, if ever, address in sufficient detail. For example, theologians generally omit or treat with disdain the Church’s teaching regarding the fall of Satan, despite its importance to the larger doctrine of original sin. Many scholars are similarly loath to discuss the immaculate conception of Mary and the question of limbo, each of which is part-and-parcel of original sin. The *Catechism*, in contrast, includes most of

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these often-ignored elements, and the Pope himself declared it to be “a sure norm for teaching the faith” and “a sure and authentic reference text for teaching catholic doctrine” to be used by “all the Church’s Pastors,” “all the faithful,” and “every individual . . . who wants to know what the Catholic Church believes.”

Thus, in spite of the Catechism’s flaws — which I do not deny — it is an authoritative, up-to-date source setting forth the official teachings of the Church. This is particularly true regarding the doctrine of original sin, which was considered a “particularly delicate subject” and given special consideration during the Catechism’s drafting process.

Accordingly, I rely below on the Catechism for the basics of the current doctrine, supplementing where appropriate with the teachings of Augustine, Aquinas, and the various Church councils that inform and support the doctrine as it is explained in the Catechism.

Turning now to the original sin doctrine itself, the story of suffering begins at the creation of the universe. The Church interprets the biblical creation narratives in Genesis as teaching that God created the universe ex nihilo. This creation included the

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3. John Paul II, *Fidei Depositum* (1992), http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/aposcons.htm. Although it does not necessarily grant the document any greater weight, it is interesting to note that the commission that drafted the Catechism was chaired by Cardinal Ratzinger. Ibid. In an introductory essay, the Cardinal explained that the Catechism was not intended to be “a sort of super-dogma,” but it is nonetheless “under the special jurisdiction of the Pope . . . in virtue of the supreme teaching authority invested in him.” Joseph Ratzinger and Christoph Schonborn, *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).


5. *Catechism*, 296-98; Gen. 1:2; Augustine, *City of God*, XI.4-6, XII.25, XIV.11
inanimate world, as well as plants, animals, humans, and angels. Consistent with the now-dominant scriptural interpretation, the Church acknowledges that creation did not literally occur over the course of seven days, nor was every living species created in the form we now know it: While angels were created very early in the process, the Church accepts that “the symbolism of the biblical language” regarding creation of humanity must be interpreted “in an authentic way,” in light of scientific understanding regarding evolutionary theory. Thus, today’s Church makes no claim that Adam and Eve were created within one week of the initial creation of the universe. But the Church holds that God did create them, and them alone, as the first two humans, from whom all others have descended.

All creation was good. This was particularly true of Adam and Eve, who were

7. “The Catechism attempts to lift from the biblical message of the ‘six-day’s work’ those truths which have lasting validity independent of all problems concerning its particular cosmic picture.” Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 70.
10. More precisely, God created Adam, and then created Eve “out of the man, that the whole human race might derive from one man.” Augustine, *City of God*, XII.21, XII.23, XII.27; Gen. 2:21-22.
11. Augustine, *City of God*, XI.21; Gen. 1:31; *Catechism*, 299, 339. The belief in an all-good creation arose out of and was shaped by early Christianity’s theological conflicts with its competitors, including Manichaeism, which held a dualist view of creation, and Gnosticism, which argued against the goodness of the physical universe. Stephen J. Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited,” *Theological Studies* 49, no. 4 (December 1988): 597-603. “On many occasions the Church has had to defend the goodness of creation, including that of the physical world.” *Catechism*, 299.
created in the image and likeness of God. Accord ingly, the first two humans were “blessed” to “share in divine life” in a “state of original holiness and justice,” which, in practical terms, meant that they “would not have to suffer or die.” The Garden of Eden was the home of Adam and Eve’s non-suffering, deathless existence, and, if the status quo had remained unchanged, they would still be alive today.

Unique among created beings, however, humans and angels were created with the ability to freely choose or reject a rightly ordered relationship with God. This ability to choose is generally known, within the Church and outside, as free will. Although God is omnipotent, God “respects the freedom of [God’s] creatures” and does not use God’s power to infringe upon free will. Nor does God’s omniscience — i.e.,

12. Gen. 1:27; Catechism, 374. “God, then, made man in His own image. For He created for him a soul endowed with reason and intelligence . . . .” Augustine, City of God, XII.23.

13. Augustine, City of God, XI.12.


15. Catechism, 384; Augustine, Enchiridion, XXXIV; Aquinas, On Evil, 168-69; Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I.95; Journet, 55.

16. Catechism, 376-77. “[I]f they discharged the obligations of obedience, an angelic immortality and a blessed eternity might ensue, without the intervention of death . . . .” Augustine, City of God, XIII.1, XIV.26; Aquinas, On Evil, 221-24; Journet, 218-19.


18. Catechism, 311.

19. Ibid.
God’s foreknowledge of what any given individual will choose — render that choice less free.\textsuperscript{20}

Some of the angels used their free will to reject their proper relationships with God.\textsuperscript{21} These angels were not content to be subordinate to God, but rather sought to be co-equal to God, which was contrary to God’s will in creation.\textsuperscript{22} They therefore “radically and irrevocably rejected God and his reign.”\textsuperscript{23} In response, God banished these angels permanently from the divine court.\textsuperscript{24} Nonetheless, they exert negative influence on Earth, urging and tempting human beings to make the same types of disordered choices that the angels themselves made.\textsuperscript{25} One of these angels is Satan, the “accuser” who tortures Job and makes numerous appearances in the New Testament.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{20} Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 498-507; Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica} I.14.xiii; Augustine, \textit{City of God}, V.9-10; Burrell, 103; van Inwagen, 80-83. I acknowledge, and the cited sources demonstrate, that the interaction between free will and divine omniscience is a far more complicated matter than my description would indicate. For purposes of this thesis, however, the mechanics of such interaction are unimportant; all that matters is that humans are truly free and God is truly omnipotent, neither of which are propositions as to which the Church has expressed any doubt. Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I.83.i, I.23.ii.


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Catechism}, 392; Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XII.6, XIV.11; Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 461-69; Journet, 253-54.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Catechism}, 392-93; Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XI.17.

\textsuperscript{24} Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XI.33; Augustine, \textit{Enchiridion}, XXVIII; Lk. 10:18. The notion of angels residing on Earth early in human history is derived in part from Gen. 6:1-6, which mentions heavenly beings fathering children with human women.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Catechism}, 394-95.

\textsuperscript{26} E.g., Job 1:6-12; Mk. 1:13; 2 Cor. 11:14.
A brief pause in the narrative is warranted here to address a widespread shortcoming in much present-day analysis of the Church’s teachings regarding the angels. Many Catholic scholars, including some otherwise highly orthodox theologians, downplay the Church’s angelic/Satanic doctrine; indeed, much recent analysis ignores the fall of the angels completely. This omission is understandable, given that there is no meaningful theological difference between the fall of Satan and the fall of Adam and Eve: In each case, a creature used its free will to disobey God for the first time, transforming the relationship between the creature and God. Thus, there is little to be gained from analyzing the former (of which almost nothing is known anyway), while the latter is still arguably a source of fruitful discussion among biblical scholars and theologians. Nonetheless, to neglect the angels completely is unwise, as the Church itself is unwavering in its propagation of the teaching, and the community of lay Catholics continues to place great stock in it. Accordingly, while discussion of the fall

27. “The power of Satan is rarely invoked by theodictists.” Tilley, 252n2. “[T]he classic disputes of our tradition have left [Satan] out . . . .” Blocher, 126-27.


of the angels by itself may not be fruitful, any analysis that purports to be within the Catholic tradition and directed to that community must include the primordial event when discussing the subsequent, and related, fall of humanity.

Indeed, the Church teaches that Satan himself instigated the fall in Eden.\textsuperscript{31} Personified as the “serpent” of Genesis 3, Satan tempted the first human beings into attempting to become like God.\textsuperscript{32} The humans’ act was in direct disobedience to God’s direction.\textsuperscript{33} Using their free will, Adam and Eve chose to succumb to Satan’s temptation, seeking to be more like God than God had ordained.\textsuperscript{34} This was the original sin: The act that introduced disorder into the relationship between humanity and God. The original sin was not punished externally by God; rather, by disordering the intended God-human relationship, it introduced a “wound” into the very nature of humanity.\textsuperscript{35} This wounded nature manifested itself as a “deprivation of original holiness and justice”

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31. Catechism, 391, 397. “[T]he gravest of [Satan’s] works was the mendacious seduction that led man to disobey God.” Ibid., 394, 2852; Aquinas, On Evil, 167.
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32. Catechism, 392, 414; Gen. 3:5; Augustine, City of God, XIV.11; Journet, 230, 256.
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33. Catechism, 397; Gen. 2:17.
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35. Catechism, 407, 417-18; Aquinas, On Evil, 167. “Their nature was deteriorated in proportion to the greatness of the condemnation of their sin . . . .” Augustine, City of God, XIII.3, XIV.1.
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that God had established before the fall. In other words, Adam and Eve “lost . . . the original grace,” and thus the first form of human existence, which had been holy and just and had lacked suffering and death, became a world in which death and suffering are inevitable. This absence of original grace is the state into which all subsequent humans (except Jesus and his mother) have been born.

The wound that the original sin caused in the human natures of Adam and Eve irreversibly changed those natures, and, because Adam and Eve are the ancestors of all human beings, we have all inherited this defect. More proximately, each new human has received the defective nature of original sin from his or her parents, although the precise method of this transmission is unclear. As I discuss at length in the next chapter, this theory of “transmission by propagation” is crucial to the doctrine of


39. Council of Trent, 5. The doctrine of the immaculate conception is discussed below in chapter 3.D.


41. “How did the sin of Adam become the sin of all his descendants? The whole human race is in Adam . . . . By this ‘unity of the human race’ all men are implicated in Adam's sin . . . . Still, the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand.” *Catechism*, 404.
original sin, for it is the fundamental distinction between original sin and all other sins: Original sin is a state that each human being is born into; one does not commit it, but neither can one avoid it.\footnote{42}{"[O]riginal sin is called ‘sin’ only in an analogical sense: it is a sin ‘contracted’ and not ‘committed’ — a state and not an act.” Ibid., 404, 419.}

Original sin is, however, linked to other sinfulness. Indeed, the very defect in our nature caused by original sin also weakens our God-created goodness, thereby making each of us susceptible “to ignorance, to suffering, and to the dominion of death.”\footnote{43}{Catechism, 405, 418; Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 224.} Thus, natural evil (here, “suffering”), and existential evil (“the dominion of death”), are the direct result of original sin.\footnote{44}{“Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. . . . Death makes its entrance into human history.” \textit{Catechism}, 400. “As a consequence of original sin, man must suffer bodily death, from which man would have been immune had he not sinned.” Ibid., 1018.} In addition, the weakness in our nature gives us an “inclination towards evil”\footnote{45}{\textit{Catechism}, 403, 407; Council of Trent, 5. “[Humanity’s] wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action and morals.” \textit{Catechism}, 418.} with “disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin.”\footnote{46}{\textit{Catechism}, 37; Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 172-74.}

Accordingly, moral evil is also attributable to original sin because it arises from the concupiscence that original sin has instilled in our nature. This is, according to Augustine and the Church, what Saint Paul means in saying that “sin came into world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread
to all because all have sinned.” 47 In sum, original sin is the cause of each person’s suffering and death, as well as the inherent defect that leads each of us to commit personal sins and inflict moral evil on other people.

There is one more theological area to which original sin is inextricably linked: redemption. The Church teaches that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided humanity with the means of overcoming original sin. 48 As a general matter, Jesus’ coming made it possible for people to achieve salvation, even though the flawed, ungodly nature bequeathed to us by Adam and Eve remains. 49 Thus, in the words of the Easter Proclamation, it was the “happy fault” of the first humans that led to the arrival of the Messiah. 50 On this point, the Church cites Saint Paul:

[J]ust as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. . . . [W]here sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. 51

This connection between original sin and redemption is tremendously important:

47. Rom. 5:12; Council of Trent, 2, 5. Similarly, “death came through a human being, . . . all die in Adam.” 1 Cor. 15:21-22. The significant problems with Augustine’s interpretation of these passages are discussed below in Chapter 3.


49. John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris, 15; Catechism, 411-12; Aquinas, Summa Theologica, III.1.

50. Catechism, 412, 420. “The doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the ‘reverse side’ of the Good News that Jesus is the Savior of all men . . . .” Ibid., 389; Aquinas, On Evil, 195-96.

Augustine taught, and the Church has reaffirmed for centuries, that every person must bear original sin, for otherwise it would be possible (as Augustine’s dispu tant Pelagius argued) to achieve salvation without the death and resurrection of Jesus.\(^{52}\) Contrary to the Pelagian position, Jesus established, through the Church, the sacrament of baptism to erase the taint of original sin.\(^{53}\) Indeed, the Church teaches that the apostolic practice of infant baptism confirms the existence and inescapable transmission of original sin, for infants are too young to have committed personal sins, so the sins that are remitted through baptism must be inherent in the infants’ natures.\(^{54}\) With this taint erased, a baptized individual can hope for ultimate salvation, but baptism does not repair the underlying weakness of human nature caused by original sin.\(^{55}\) Thus, even the baptized remain subject to death, suffering, and moral evil.\(^{56}\)

Each of the foregoing topics — creation, the fall of the angels, original sin, and the coming of Jesus — is part of a single theological narrative. The Church stresses

\(^{52}\) Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants*, trans. Peter Holmes et al., in vol. I of *The Anti-Pelagian Works of Saint Augustine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1872), III.1-12; Second Council of Orange, Can. 8, 19, 21; Council of Trent, 3. “[T]he whole mass of the human race is condemned ... so that no one is exempt from this just and due punishment, unless delivered by mercy and undeserved grace . . . .” Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.12; Aquinas, *On Evil*, 193.

\(^{53}\) *Catechism*, 405, 978, 1225, 1250, 1263; *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 845, 848-78; Second Council of Orange, Can. 13; Aquinas, *On Evil*, 195; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III.66.ix, III.69. I speak here of the sacrament of baptism, not the act of baptism, which pre-dated Jesus. See Mk. 1:4-11; Mt. 3; Lk. 3.

\(^{54}\) Council of Carthage, Can. 110; Council of Trent, 3-5.


\(^{56}\) *Catechism*, 1264.
that, while each individual aspect is a true and essential tenet of the Catholic faith, only when viewed as a unit do they tell the entire story of Christianity. As discussed below, however, this view is severely flawed, for the doctrine of original sin is fundamentally inconsistent with the other revealed truths in the faith narrative. Indeed, original sin is more than merely a theological outlier; it is, even in isolation, an inadequate and harmful doctrine.
CHAPTER THREE
FLAWS IN THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

My wrath is kindled against you . . . for you have not spoken of me what is right.
— Job 42:7

There is an immense quantity of scholarly material criticizing the doctrine of original sin, arguing that it is demonstrably false both as a matter of logic and in light of contemporary scientific knowledge and principles. This chapter compiles and analyzes some of the most prominent intellectual challenges to the doctrine. Because it would be impossible to set forth every such critique here, this chapter focuses specifically on Catholic theological critiques, demonstrating how original sin is erroneous even when viewed solely from within a purely Catholic framework.\(^1\) By showing that the doctrine of original sin is untenable even on its own theological terms, I hope to prove that the need for reform of the Church’s teachings is indisputable.

I begin by examining (A) areas in which the Church explicitly acknowledges that the doctrine is flawed or inadequate, and then (B) additional ways, not formally admitted by the Church, in which original sin is manifestly deficient. I then note (C) irresolvable theological conflicts between the doctrine of original sin and other, equally

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1. For this reason, I generally omit critiques arising from within Protestant and Jewish traditions, even though the “religion-neutral value turf” on which much discussion of God and evil takes place sometimes makes cross-application of such critiques possible. Adams, 179. Similarly, philosophical analyses problem of evil rarely address the scriptural arguments or magisterial traditions invoked in support of original sin, and so the work of most philosophers is of limited value in critiquing the Catholic teaching on its own terms.
important dogmatic teachings. Finally, I discuss (D) the theoretical and practical
damage caused by all of these problems, including the harm they inflict on the faithful
and the institution of the Church.

A. Acknowledged Doctrinal Deficiencies

Many of the theological flaws in the doctrine of original sin arise from its
deficiency. Admittedly, no response to the problem of evil is entirely adequate, so
failing to completely “answer” the problem is not inherently troublesome. Original sin,
however, does not meet even the limited goals it sets for itself, which are to explain how
evil entered the world, how it has been passed down through the generations, and why it
continues to exist and affect our lives even after the death and resurrection of Jesus. As
discussed below, the Church explicitly acknowledges these deficiencies.

The first acknowledged deficiency in the doctrine of original sin relates to how
that sin has been passed from Adam and Eve to all subsequent human beings. The
debate over the transmission of original sin is as old as the doctrine itself, beginning
with Augustine’s famous proposition that original sin is passed on to each new person
through sexual activity.\(^2\) As Augustine read the scripture, Romans 5:12 links original
sin to all humanity, while Genesis 3:7 (i.e., the “fig-leaf” passage) links original sin to
Adam and Eve’s consciousness of their sexual identities.\(^3\) Augustine used these


\(^3\) Ibid., XIII.13-15, XIV.17; Augustine, \textit{On the Merits}, III.14; Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 167, 193, 212,
285; Aquinas, \textit{Contra Gentiles}, IV.50-52; Council of Carthage, Can. 110; Second Council of Orange,
Can. 2; Elaine Pagels, \textit{Adam, Eve, and the Serpent} (New York: Random House, 1988), xix, 134. Romans
passages as the primary biblical support for his argument that everyone bears original sin because we are all products of the physical act of sexual procreation. Specifically, Augustine wrote, Adam’s seminal fluid contained the beginnings of the whole human race, and it was through Adam’s semen — and then the semen of each subsequent generation — that original sin was propagated. As empirical proof of his theory, Augustine cited what he viewed as the inability of men to entirely control the movement of their sexual organs; Augustine saw this as further evidence that original sin and its resulting concupiscence are located in the genitals. Given such a location, it seems reasonable to infer that original sin is transmitted through sexual activity, not unlike other diseases. This view was endorsed by early Church councils and remained

5:12 is the “seat . . . of the doctrine of original sin. Whenever this doctrine is discussed, Romans 5 is in the eye of the storm.” Blocher, 63-81.


essentially unchanged through Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent.  

It has been recognized for centuries, however, that Augustine’s theory was based, to a significant extent, on his use of a faulty Latin translation of the Greek scriptures. Augustine’s Latin bible translated Romans 5:12 as stating that “sin came into the world through one man, . . . in whom all men sinned.” Augustine read the phrase “in whom” as referring to the fact that the entire human race was “in” Adam’s genitals, which therefore provided the means for transmitting original sin to his descendants. But Paul did not write that all men die because of Adam, “in whom all men sinned”; rather, Romans 5:12 says that all men die like Adam “because all men have sinned.” In other words, Paul wrote that each person, like Adam, commits his own sin, which leads to his own death. This is precisely the opposite of Augustine’s argument that all people die because of Adam’s sin, regardless of any personal sins they actually commit. Without the phrase “in whom,” the primary scriptural support for Augustine’s theory of sexual propagation of original sin disappears.


10. Augustine, City of God, XIII.14; Aquinas, On Evil, 169, 200-01, 217; Council of Trent, 2.

11. “Accounting for the propagation of original sin by the disorders of human sexual life has no sufficient warrant from the Bible.” Blocher, 112-14.
The Church is, by now, fully aware of this problem, and it shies away from explicitly teaching that original sin is propagated through sex. Instead, the Church broadly reaffirms Augustine’s argument that original sin is transmitted by “propagation, not by imitation,” and “contracted, not committed,” while remaining silent as to how original sin is propagated or contracted. Rather than provide a teaching on this matter, the Church acknowledges that “the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand.”

There are numerous non-scriptural theological problems with the “transmission by propagation” theory, some of which are discussed later in this chapter. But the fact that the Church cannot explain the transmission of original sin is itself problematic. Without a specific connection between Adam and Eve’s sin and currently living people, the doctrine brings us no closer to comprehending the existence of evil today. In other words, original sin without a viable theory of transmission renders the original sin of Adam and Eve a mere historical relic — a description of the first disobedience and the effect it had on the two people who disobeyed. Absent a connection from Adam and Eve to the present, the doctrine of original sin leaves us to hypothesize that every

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12. *Catechism*, 404, 419; Aquinas, *On Evil*, 167. Augustine’s theory was intended to contradict the Pelagian notion that Adam’s sin was merely the prime example of human sinfulness. Second Council of Orange, Can. 8, 13, 19, 21. Karl Rahner, however, noted that acknowledging the Church’s traditional understanding of transmission “is far from saying that we must or even can regard this understanding . . . today as dogma.” Karl Rahner, *Faith and Ministry*, vol. XIX of *Theological Investigations*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 223.

human being has been and will be punished vicariously for the first couple’s act. Such vicarious punishment is not, and could never be, a dogmatic truth of the Church: It would be inconsistent with any meaningful understanding of a benevolent God, unjust under any mainstream moral standard, and disproportionate to the quantity and quality of the sin committed. An understanding of transmission, therefore, is integral to the doctrine of original sin. Yet the Church, having (rightly) de-emphasized Augustine’s theory without developing an alternative, can do no more that admit that transmission is a complete mystery. As a result, the doctrine of original sin fails to meet even the basic goal of responding to the problem of evil in a way that furthers our understanding of why people living today suffer.

The second deficiency that the Church acknowledges within the original sin doctrine arises from the interpretation of the serpent of Genesis 3. The Church reads the relevant scriptural passages as saying that Satan tempted the first humans into rejecting a rightly ordered relationship with God. But the Church also rejects any form of dualism: Satan has no power beyond what God allows, and so all of Satan’s activities

14. This is not to suggest that a coherent theory of transmission by propagation would solve the problem of vicarious punishment, but it would at least provide a facially plausible counterargument that the punishment is not vicarious because each individual actually shares Adam and Eve’s fallen state: “[W]hen a person is punished for the sin of the first parent, he is not punished for the sin of another but for his own sin.” Aquinas, On Evil, 172; Blocher, 65-81.

15. Hick, Evil, 113-14, 249-50. “[T]he image of a God who could have . . . an infant . . . suffer for the sin of another . . . can appear morally primitive, repugnant.” Gleason, 7.
are “permitted by divine providence.” Accordingly, God either permitted or directed Satan to perform the temptation. Even granting that the humans in Eden had free will to reject Satan’s overtures, the act of the temptation itself is puzzling: Why would God have allowed Satan to tempt the humans? This question is not simply historical; it is also relevant to believers today, for Satan’s influence did not end in Eden. “By our first parents’ sin, the devil has acquired a certain domination over man,” and Satan continues to tempt human beings into indulging in the concupiscence original sin instilled in us. This ongoing Satanic participation in the propagation of moral evil is just as troubling as the primordial event. Where is God while Satan performs these acts?

The Church admits that there is no answer to this question. “It is a great mystery that providence should permit diabolical activity.” In other words, the Church teaches that evil arose and continues to arise not from God, but from humanity’s free response to Satan’s temptation — while God’s involvement in such temptation is mysterious. This answers nothing. It certainly does not explain the origin of evil, which is now shrouded not just in the inherent mystery of the problem of evil, but in a double layer of incomprehensibility: God’s permitting Satan’s temptation, plus Adam

16. *Catechism*, 395. “[T]he demons . . . have only that power which the secret decree of the Almighty allots to them,” and “not even the devil himself is outside of God’s government.” Augustine, *City of God*, II.23, XXII.24.


and Eve’s paradoxical accession thereto (which, as discussed below, is the third acknowledged deficiency in the original sin doctrine). The Satanic temptation does not even help further the main purpose of the original sin doctrine, which is to absolve God of the charge of originating evil. God may not have performed the temptation personally, but the omnipotent deity presumably knew better than the naïve humans what utter calamity the original sin would wreak on them, yet God allowed Satan to actively encourage the disobedience. If we apply human standards of morality to that divine choice, God must be at least somewhat culpable for the results. To use a parental analogy, it is like a parent allowing a malevolent adult to talk a child into jumping down an elevator shaft: yes, the child will learn the important lesson that gravity and strangers can be dangerous, but both the lesson and the child will be short-lived.

In fact, Satan’s presence in the garden does not even necessarily relieve God of responsibility for moral evil, for, while Adam and Eve had free will, they apparently had used it purely for good until God allowed them to be subjected to malevolent influence. Adam and Eve were not inveterate sinners; they were good and remained

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20. Adams analogizes the traditional story of the Fall to a parent leaving a small child alone in a gas-filled room after telling the child not to touch the stove. Adams, 39. Augustine’s response to this charge is that God already knew that the humans would sin, but allowing Satan to tempt them gave them the opportunity to nonetheless “remain[ ] upright.” Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.27.

that way until God permitted Satan, for mysterious reasons, to intervene.\textsuperscript{22} Does this permission imply that God wanted them to sin? If so, can it be just for all of us to suffer as a result?

In response to these logical and moral criticisms of Satanic involvement in original sin, the Church hedges its bets on God’s motivation in permitting Satanic activity, thereby multiplying the doctrinal confusion. The \textit{Catechism} vividly demonstrates the Church’s dissembling. In the very same paragraph that acknowledges the mystery of God’s allowing diabolical activity, the Church states that God “with strength and gentleness guides human and cosmic history . . . . [I]n everything God works for good with those who love him.”\textsuperscript{23} These platitudes seem designed to obfuscate the significance of the Satanic mystery they accompany. Their suggestion, implied by their contextual placement within a discussion of Satanic activity, is that God “works” behind the scenes to “guide” Satan’s acts to “good” results as part of God’s design for “human and cosmic history.” This is merely an oblique version of the theory that suffering and evil are ultimately good because they are part of God’s plan. But, as discussed previously, this theory is just a diversion, for the Church recognizes that “evil never becomes a good”: Even if God does eventually draw good results from evil, this neither renders the evil less evil nor provides any explanation of why God

\textsuperscript{22} Augustine waffles somewhat on this issue, arguing that Adam and Eve were good before the temptation, but also that they must have had the will to sin sometime before actually eating the fruit, or else they would not have taken that action. Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XII.6-7, XIV.13-14.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Catechism}, 395; Rom. 8:28
permits the evil in the first place. Accordingly, the Church’s references to God’s benevolent influence on history are a red herring, distracting the believer from the underlying point that, according to the doctrine of original sin, God inexplicably has allowed Satan to tempt all people, from the first two to those living 2,000 years after the resurrection.

In sum, the admitted mystery of God’s connection to Satanic activity negates any explanatory power that Satan’s actions might otherwise have had for the origin of evil. The involvement of Satan merely adds a layer of confusion to the issue, such that, instead of asking why God created good humans who would bring the evils of sin on themselves (an already unanswerable question), we now must ask why God permitted Satan to tempt humans to sin, and why God created humans who would give in to the temptation. This “great mystery,” therefore, simultaneously explains nothing and creates new problems, which gives it less explanatory power regarding the problem of evil than does no answer at all. (Providing no answer, at least, would present no additional difficulties beyond those inherent in the problem of evil.) The true mystery here is not why “providence should permit diabolical activity,” but rather why the

24. Kant, “On the Failure,” 287; G. Daly, 105-06, 108. Similarly, the passing reference in this context to God’s “work” seems to imply that God is “working” to counter Satan or turn Satanic acts to good purposes, but there is no explanation of why God’s work in this area is not successful.


Church teaches Satanic involvement in original sin, when such involvement does nothing to further our understanding of the origins or continued existence of evil.  

The final acknowledged deficiency in the doctrine of original sin — the continued existence of evil in the post-resurrection faith community — is perhaps the most troubling. Even if one assumes that Satan successfully tempted Adam and Eve, and their resulting defective natures somehow have been passed down to all other humans, the Church has long taught that baptism erases the taint of original sin. It would seem, therefore, that if original sin causes death and suffering, and baptism counteracts original sin, a baptized person should be free of death and suffering — s/he should be like Adam and Eve were before they committed their sin. At the very least, even if baptism mitigates original sin without erasing it completely, the baptized should be less subject to suffering and less inclined to commit personal sins than the unbaptized. Yet baptized Catholics obviously suffer and die like everyone else, and no evidence suggests that baptism renders the baptized person less likely to commit moral evil or to be concupiscent.

Confronted with this seeming inconsistency, the Church

27. Daly is deeply disturbed by the Church’s continuing references to the fall of the angels in relation to the fall of humanity: “The dismayed reader may begin to wonder what is happening here as we are once more plunged back into the realm of apocalyptic mythology . . . . Only die-hard integralists will attempt to defend this literalised myth as pertaining to the core values of Catholic faith. . . . Putting this kind of thing in a modern catechism is simply incomprehensible . . . .” G. Daly, 105-06. Cardinal Ratzinger disagreed: “It is impossible to imagine the consciousness of faith and of the life of the liturgy without a place for the angels.” Ratzinger, Introduction, 70.

28. Council of Carthage, Can. 110; Second Council of Orange, Can. 13; Council of Trent, 3-5; Catechism, 1250. Aquinas wrote that “baptismal grace” takes the “place of” Adam and Eve’s state of “original justice.” Aquinas, On Evil, 290.

29. Pagels notes that the Pelagians used this argument both to counter Augustine and to bolster their own argument that suffering and death are part of the natural order. Pagels, 136, 144-45.
admits that there is no answer: The Church acknowledges that it cannot explain why God, after the coming of Jesus, still “permits physical and even moral evil.”

This is a serious deficiency. As the Church tells it, the entire narrative of Christianity is bound up in the notion that original sin “merited us so great a redeemer,” i.e., that original sin made necessary for our redemption the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, such that baptism in Jesus’ name would provide a way to escape the taint of Adam and Eve. But it is difficult for a rational person to accept this faith narrative when the purported effects of original sin remain seemingly unaffected by the very sacrament intended to undo them. The Church’s failure to explain how its theory of original sin is consistent with the post-resurrection state of the world is a theological and empirical indication of the misguided nature of the theory.

B. Additional Doctrinal Deficiencies

The foregoing section discussed Church-recognized deficiencies in the doctrine of original sin. In addition to these, there are several other areas in which the doctrine is manifestly deficient, although the Church does not formally refer to these areas as “mysteries.” Below, I briefly explore four such problems.

Augustine’s response was that baptism can prevent the death of the soul, but it does not prevent the death or “rebellion” of the body. Augustine, City of God, XIII.4; Aquinas, On Evil, 172-75, 195. He reasoned that, if baptism simply solved the whole problem of original sin, “faith itself would be thereby enervated [because] faith is . . . only faith when it waits in hope for what is not yet seen in substance.” Augustine, City of God, XIII.4; Augustine, On the Merits, II.50. This patently circular argument could be used to “prove” any assertion about God, and it therefore proves nothing.

30. Catechism, 324. “[T]he only appropriate mystery of faith in God’s relation to suffering is not if or how omnipotence can be justified before the world’s evil but rather why God’s saving omnipotence does not destroy the evil of suffering and death completely in the present moment.” Thiel, 138-39.
First, original sin contains an irresolvable internal contradiction. For the original sin of Adam and Eve to have any meaning, it must have represented a break from what preceded it. In other words, Adam and Eve must have been without sin (original or personal) before the fall. Indeed, this is what the Church teaches in the concept of “original grace,” and the Council of Trent declared it anathema to state otherwise.\(^{31}\) Thus, until the events of Genesis 3, Adam and Eve had neither committed any personal sin nor been infected with the inclination to sin that arose from original sin. They were entirely good, just as God had created them. But, as theologians from Pelagius to John Hick and beyond have noted, this makes little sense: Why would a good creature, given a choice between sinning or not sinning, choose to sin?\(^{32}\) Alternatively, if God knew at the time of creation that Adam and Eve would use their free will to sin (as God certainly did know\(^{33}\)), is it not meaningless to assert that they were created good?\(^{34}\) The Church’s response is that they sinned because they had free will, but this addresses only the question of how it was possible to disobey God, not why they would do so. The Church has no answer to the question of why holy people,

\(^{31}\) Council of Trent, 1.

\(^{32}\) Hick, *Evil*, 69, 174-75; Tilley, 114. Blocher concedes that this aspect of the traditional original sin doctrine “is opaque, absurd, and unexplained.” Blocher, 109-11.

\(^{33}\) “God, when He created [Adam], was certainly not ignorant of his future maliginity . . . .” Augustine, *City of God*, XI.17-18 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, CIV; Journet, 177-78, 231-32.

\(^{34}\) Hick, *Evil*, 63, 69, 174-75.
created good, would choose the temptations of Satan over the direct command of God.\textsuperscript{35}

This inconsistency highlights the illogicality of the doctrine of original sin, as well as its lack of explanatory power.

Second, original sin does not explain the continuation of existential evil after Jesus. Given that the resurrection explicitly provided believers with a way to conquer death, should not the post-resurrection faith tradition — at least its most devout members — feel little or no trepidation regarding death? Why does it seem that no one, including the Catholic community, is immune from existential concerns? Instead of addressing this issue, the doctrine of original sin emphasizes the scriptural teaching that humanity’s first sin introduced death into the world, while God responded with the gracious gift of the resurrection. But why we die and what happens after death are very different questions from why we fear dying, and original sin has little to say regarding the latter. The Church seems to teach that God conquered death but continues to permit the death-based suffering caused by original sin. At best, this implies that God’s victory over death was only partial; at worst, it was basically meaningless for living people during their lifetimes. Either way, the post-resurrection fear and anguish of existential suffering is not explained by the original sin doctrine.

Third, original sin does not explain natural evil. While original sin made it possible for humans to be harmed or killed by external events, there is nothing in the

\textsuperscript{35} Augustine scolded his critics for raising this objection, arguing that, because evil is a nothing — an absence — to search for a “cause” of the first sin is a fruitless endeavor. Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XII.6-7.
doctrine that explains why such events actually occur. For example, the Church’s official doctrine tells a man that, because of Adam’s sin, he will die if he does not get enough food to eat, but the doctrine cannot explain why a drought may linger for years and deprive millions of people of food. In effect, original sin says that droughts were always present, but, until the fall, they posed no danger to humanity. The problem with this explanation (in addition to its implausibility) is that it fails to explain the unequal distribution of natural evils: An earthquake may send one occupied bridge plunging into a river while others stand; an influenza epidemic may select infant and elderly victims from populations worldwide; a tornado may obliterate one home and family while leaving a neighbor’s home untouched.36 In each case, the affected people are just as tainted by original sin as are the unaffected. So what does original sin actually mean for the experience of natural evil?

One possible response to this criticism might be that these events are examples of the interaction between God’s natural order and humanity’s original sin: God merely sets the natural processes into action, and our own original sin makes us subject to harm from nature, but God does not actively select the people who suffer the harm. This answer is not acceptable. It is possible to conceive of a God who might escape culpability in this fashion, but that would not be the God of Christianity. Christianity’s God is one of personal relationships, and it is an oxymoron to refer to the Christian God

36. Natural evil is “distributed in random and meaningless ways.” Hick, Evil, 333.
who acts with disregard for the effects of God’s actions on humanity.\textsuperscript{37} Stated differently, it is incongruous to assert that God takes a personal interest in each individual’s salvation from sin (which is a basic tenant of the faith), while also asserting that God takes no personal interest in whether an individual gets cancer or dies in a tsunami. Far from resolving this tension, original sin heightens it by invoking a distinctly non-personal God when it comes to inherited guilt, while failing to explain how the same God nonetheless has a genuine stake in the ultimate happiness of each guilty person.

Finally, there is one particular application of original sin that best demonstrates the insufficiency of original sin in explaining human suffering. Since the beginning of Christianity, believers and theologians have asked what happens to infants who die before they are baptized.\textsuperscript{38} Although writings on this topic are extensive, it is not a difficult question in light of the traditional understanding of original sin. Under the doctrine, all people are tainted by original sin from the moment of their conception,\textsuperscript{39} and they remain so until baptized.\textsuperscript{40} Those who die without having been baptized are

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\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 193-96; Adams, 29-31.
\textsuperscript{38} “From the beginning of Christian times unbaptized children became the test-case par excellence for belief in the existence of original sin.” Trooster, 1, 89.
\textsuperscript{39} Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 193, 196; Pagels, 131.
\textsuperscript{40} “The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.” \textit{Catechism}, 1250, 1257. Baptism, here, refers to all forms of Church-recognized baptism, including methods that do not involve the usual ritual, such as baptism by blood and baptism by desire. Ibid., 1258-60. “For whatever unbaptized persons die confessing Christ, this confession is of the same efficacy for the remission of sins as if they were washed in the sacred font of baptism.” Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XIII.7.
\end{flushright}
not saved, regardless of the merit of their good works in life. Infants or otherwise, the unbaptized dead are in hell.

The callousness of this statement is striking. Could babies who have not yet reached the age of moral agency, and therefore cannot be considered to have committed any personal sin, really be damned for all eternity? Is this consistent with the concept of a benevolent God who sent God’s own son to die for our redemption? This problem is explored in depth later in this chapter and in chapter 4, but it is important to note here that there is no explanation of original sin that can handle this problem satisfactorily: Either babies go to hell, which seems incredibly unjust (even if it is a “limbo” or “gentler” hell, as Augustine and others have proposed⁴¹), or they do not, in which case there is something wrong within the doctrine of original sin.

C. Conflicts With Other Church Doctrines

Of all the problems inherent in original sin, the most troublesome are those that involve irresolvable conflicts between the doctrine and other primary Church teachings. These are fundamentally contradictory dogmas, which ask the clergy to teach and the laity to hold irreconcilable tenets of faith, not mere technical inconsistencies between complicated, arcane teachings. Such serious conflicts are numerous, and three of the most important are discussed below.

To the contemporary believer or theologian, the most glaring inconsistency between original sin and the Church’s other doctrines is in the treatment of Genesis.

⁴¹. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XCIII.
The Church teaches that the scriptural creation stories — chapters 1-2 of Genesis — are not to be understood as historical events. 42 These chapters present divine truths regarding the origin of the universe, but they use mythical and metaphorical language to do so: The Church acknowledges that creation did not take place in six twenty-four hour periods, that the heavens are not literally made of water suspended above the earth, etc. 43 The flood stories in Genesis 6-8 are equally ahistorical: There was no “Noah” who put a pair (or seven pairs) of each animal on a boat. In fact, until at least the Abraham narratives beginning in chapter 12, the Church accepts there is nothing in Genesis that properly can be called history.

The exception is Genesis 3. The doctrine of original sin teaches and relies on the existence of Adam and Eve as an historical original couple whose sin taints all of humanity because all of humanity is descended from them. This is a necessary corollary of the doctrine, for otherwise the notion of inherited sin would make little sense. 44 If it were not the first human who sinned, the original, sinless human(s) would

42. “The biblical narrative of the origins does not relate events in the sense of modern historiography, but rather, it speaks through images.” Ratzinger, Ratzinger Report, 91. “Catholic theology for quite some time now has adopted the principle [that] that story of creation as contained in Genesis 1 need not be taken in a historical and literal sense.” Vanneste, 28.

43. Daly collects several examples from within the Catechism itself, including explanations of the symbolic nature of God’s resting after creation (Catechism, 337) and the tree of knowledge (ibid., 396), as well as an explicit reference to “interpreting the symbolism of biblical language in an authentic way” with regard to “our first parents, Adam and Eve” (ibid, 375). Even Augustine did not believe that the seven “days” of creation were literal twenty-four-hour days, saying that “we are not to conceive of this in a childish fashion.” Augustine, City of God, XI.6-8. “[T]he Bible is not a natural science textbook, nor does it intend to be such.” Ratzinger, In the Beginning, 4-5, 50.

44. “Any concession to the symbolic character of Genesis leaves the Tridentine doctrine of original justice and the fall without the biblical support which the council [of Trent] invokes.” G. Daly, 94-95. “The doctrine . . . is so bound up with the literalisation and historicisation of the Adamic myth
still be alive today.\footnote{In response to this problem, one defender of the traditional view speculates that Adam and Eve would not still be alive in this world because they would have “graduated” to the next world without dying. Groeschel, 110.} The first sinner also must have been an ancestor of each subsequent person, so that the tainted nature of the original sinner could be transmitted to every human being throughout geography and time.\footnote{Pius XII, \textit{Humani Generis} (1950), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html, 37.} Thus, if it is true that sin introduced death and suffering into a previously deathless world, the first transgression must have been committed by the first human.

Accordingly, the Church teaches that Adam and Eve existed, historically, as our first ancestors, the first human beings. There really was an Adam — although the Church acknowledges the evolutionary theory that he may have been a child of more primitive simians rather than formed directly from the earth — and there really was an Eve — although she may also have been an child of animals rather than formed directly from Adam’s rib.\footnote{As Pius XII delicately phrased the issue, “the Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that . . . research and discussions . . . take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter.” Ibid., 36.} These people, unlike their purely animal ancestors, were born immortal. Their human status granted them an eternal life free of suffering for as long as they obeyed the will of God. They were also the first moral beings on earth, with the free will to obey or disobey. Of course, they disobeyed, and the rest is history.

that any effort to demythologise the Genesis narrative has been routinely construed by the guardians of orthodoxy as an attack on the doctrine.” Ibid., 97. For an example of such construal, see Blocher, 49-56.
This narrative strains credulity, particularly in light of current scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{48} But one need not consult fossil records to identify the main problem with the Church’s understanding of Genesis 3: The doctrine of original sin relies on a literalist scriptural hermeneutic that the Church has otherwise formally rejected.\textsuperscript{49} It was Augustine’s hermeneutic, and it made sense for his time, as well as for each of the reaffirmations of original sin through Trent.\textsuperscript{50} But literalism is no longer how the Church reads the beginning of Genesis, and there is no principled basis on which to make an exception for Genesis 3. Indeed, it seems clear that the Church does not maintain original sin because Genesis 3 is uniquely subject to a literal interpretation, but rather the Church employs a literal interpretation of Genesis 3 for the sole purpose of

\textsuperscript{48}  “[F]or the modern man who has learned the distinction between myth and history, this chronicle of the first man and the first pair can no longer be co-ordinated with the time of history and the space of geography as these have been irreversibly constituted by critical awareness. . . . What we know, as men of science, about the beginnings of mankind leaves no place for such a primordial event.” Ricoeur, Symbolism, 235. “Unwillingness to abandon the literal historical interpretation . . . is especially regrettable . . . because it places a totally unnecessary stumbling-block before critically minded believers of good will and ecclesial loyalty . . . .” G. Daly, 95; Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 114.

\textsuperscript{49}  The Pontifical Biblical Commission has unambiguously disavowed “biblical fundamentalism” — i.e., “consider[ing] historical everything that is reported or recounted with verbs in the past tense” — because such a reading “accepts the literal reality of an ancient, out-of-date cosmology.” Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993), http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm. The authors of the Catechism “make cautious (and not obviously consistent) concessions to the symbolic character of the biblical text. Then they ignore these concessions when they turn to affirming the traditional dogma of original justice and the fall.” G. Daly, 94-95; Korsmeyer, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{50}  Vanneste is factually incorrect (Vanneste, 136-38) when he asserts that an allegorical or symbolic reading of Genesis 3 was not proposed until after Trent; indeed, some of Augustine’s own contemporaries argued for such an interpretation. Augustine, City of God, XIII.21. “A suspicion . . . arose in former times that the biblical narratives upon which the Church’s doctrine of original sin is founded could possibly be interpreted in a less strictly historical sense.” Trooster, 1; Domning, 20-21.
preserving original sin. This reverse-engineered scriptural hermeneutic is intellectually perverse.\(^{51}\)

In reality, Genesis 3 is an ahistorical, mythological narrative that demonstrates basic truths about the realities of human knowledge, disobedience, suffering, and death. To note just one piece of textual evidence, the very “name” of the Church’s alleged first man manifests the mythology of the story: In Genesis 3, he is not “Adam,” a named individual, but rather “ha’adam” — הָאָדָם — “the earth thing.” So, even in the text of the scripture itself, “Adam” is a term for humanity at large, not an historical persona — a fact reflected in every modern, mainstream English translation.\(^{52}\) I need not repeat here all the other reasons that a non-literal interpretation is indicated — such as the absence from recorded history of talking snakes or trees that bear immortality fruit — because there is no viable counterargument.\(^{53}\) While some faith traditions employ a literalist interpretation of Genesis, the Roman Catholic Church is not one of them.

\(^{51}\) As Korsmeyer notes, it is particularly glaring that the Church denies the significance of scientific knowledge in this interpretive context while using putative “laws” of biology to support its interpretations regarding matters such as birth control and homosexuality. Korsmeyer, 89.

\(^{52}\) For example, see Gen. 3:9, which both the NRSV and the New International Version translate as “the LORD God called to the man . . . .” “There is no doubt that those who produced this narrative . . . robbed it of its particularity, in order to offer it as a universal paradigm.” Andre Wenin, “The Serpent and the Woman, or the Process of Evil According to Genesis 2-3,” in Boureux and Theobald, 41. “It would have been better here [for the \textit{Catechism}] to be consistent with the standard exegesis and understand Adam and Eve as collective figures (the man, made from earth, and the woman, the source of human life) for what happens in all of us.” Haring, 31.

\(^{53}\) As one Jesuit author writes from a pastoral perspective, it “insults our intelligence to suspect that all our woes root themselves in a pair of not overly bright nudists in a park, falling victim to the blather of a fast-talking snake.” William J. O’Malley, \textit{Redemptive Suffering: Understanding Suffering, Living With It, Growing Through It} (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 20.
In response to a perceived threat from science, some Catholic theologians have tried to show, with varying degrees of success, that evolution and similar findings do not necessarily conflict with original sin. But the reconciliation of science and scripture is, at most, a side issue to the biggest challenge to original sin, which is the proper interpretation of scripture. Whether due to scientific advancements or developments in biblical studies or both, the Church has already abandoned literalism in Genesis. The Church knows that Genesis 3 is not history, and yet it continues the teaching of original sin. Such doctrinal inconsistency does a disservice to the theologians who take these matters seriously, as well as to the pastors who must answer the questions of the faithful. One simply cannot explain the Church’s teachings on scripture and creation and original sin without contradicting oneself — a hallmark of logical failure.

The second conflict between original sin and other Church teachings lies in the understanding of God’s benevolence. The Church states definitively that God’s love, as

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54. John Paul II encouraged theologians to accept that evolution is “more than an hypothesis” and that “there is no conflict between evolution and the doctrine of the faith.” John Paul II, *Message to the Pontifical Academy*, 3-4. A typical example of an attempted reconciliation is that of Trooster, whose solution is to view Genesis 3 not as a portrayal of humanity’s beginnings, but rather of “the situation as God actually and ultimately intends it to be.” Trooster, 68. This reinterpretation, although it successfully eliminates tension between evolution and original sin, necessarily denies the historicity of Adam and Eve, and it therefore vitiates the doctrine in the name of saving it.

55. “[T]he ground of all truthfulness consists in the care that makes sure of what one believes and what one does not believe, and in the care never to state a conviction when one is not really certain of it. He who says . . . that he believes something, without having perhaps given a single look at himself to ascertain whether he is indeed certain, or certain up to a point, of this conviction, tells a lie . . . .” Kant, “On the Failure,” 294-95. “The Church has the duty, not only of saying the right thing, but also of saying the right thing ‘rightly’: that is, so that there is the greatest possible prospect that its right teaching will also actually be believed.” Rahner, *Faith and Ministry*, 219.
manifested by the salvation made possible by Jesus, is personal. God has a one-on-one relationship with each person who seeks God through the Son, and the Church explicitly affirms that God hopes for each such person to achieve salvation. Original sin, however, teaches that human beings are tainted universally, without regard to the personal sins of each individual, and many of these tainted souls will never be cleansed. In short, the Church teaches that God is simultaneously the God of mass condemnation and personal salvation: God imposes the handicap of concupiscence on everyone, then, when all have sinned as a result, God graciously forgives a few individuals.56

It is confusing, at best, to speak of a God of love who imposes a blanket curse on humanity, much less a curse imposed because of a single sin committed by two long-dead individuals. How could a God who loves each individual allow us all to start life at such a deficit, and then hold our inability to redeem our debt against us? The conflict between these principles is stark.

To its credit, however, the Church has an answer to such criticism: Original sin made necessary personal redemption through Jesus. Without original sin, Jesus would not have been needed for salvation; indeed, he would not have been needed at all. Because Jesus loves each individual and provides a means to salvation, his death and resurrection more than make up for the humanity-wide detriment of original sin: “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”57 Thus, the Church argues,

56. Hick, Evil, 113-14. This criticism of original sin is as old as the doctrine itself. Vanneste, 59.

57. Rom. 5:20; Catechism, 312, 412, 420; Journet, 257-60.
original sin is consistent with how we understand God’s personal love, i.e., original sin was the precursor to God’s providing each of us with the way to achieve salvation.

This response has some superficial scriptural appeal, for its underlying notion — presenting Jesus as the “new Adam” — is grounded in the writings of Paul. But, like most aspects of the original sin doctrine, it falls apart when applied to actual suffering. If Jesus is to provide the answer to mass damnation, it must be that Christianity sees in Jesus a path to meaningful suffering — a way for a sufferer to take the evils introduced by original sin and turn them to better use as means to salvation. Jesus himself certainly did so, and it is easy to conceive of similar suffering that generates positive spiritual growth, bringing the sufferer closer to redemption. A non-fatal illness, or a close call in an accident, for example, may cause the sufferer to reflect on life and dedicate herself to good works.

The problem is that many — perhaps most — evils are unrelated to the achievement of salvation. While some suffering can be redemptive, much of it does not appear to have any such positive result on the individual level. As a simple example,

58. 1 Cor. 15:21-22; Second Council of Orange, Can. 15; Augustine, City of God, XIII.23.
59. John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris, 3, 16-18. “Suffering must serve for conversion, that is, for the rebuilding of goodness in the subject, who can recognize the divine mercy in this call to repentance.” Ibid., 12.
60. Ibid., 19-21, 23.
61. “Sometimes . . . ills are ordained . . . as a help against future sin, or for progress in virtue, either of him who suffers it or of another.” Aquinas, On Evil, 223.
62. “The children burned to death by napalm bombs were not going through a process of human maturing. Elsewhere, too, in innumerable cases there is suffering . . . which simply demands too much from a person, warps and damages his character, leaves him preoccupied solely with satisfying the most
a brain aneurism that kills a young man, “Mr. Smith,” does not help him grow or be saved. In response, a common traditional claim would be that Mr. Smith’s death makes his survivors more aware of the preciousness of life, as well as calling attention to all the good Mr. Smith did while alive, such that he becomes an inspiration. Perhaps, but Mr. Smith got nothing out of the deal, and the God of personal love would not use one person as a mere means to the end of marginally and indirectly benefit other people (also causing them great pain in the process). To do so would be *per se* immoral. In any event, the very idea that God crafts each person’s suffering to facilitate redemption is inconsistent with original sin, under which everyone is subject to natural suffering as it happens to occur in the natural order. Under original sin, God does not send earthquakes to help believers find faith; God created a world in which earthquakes happen, and it was the original sin of Adam and Eve that made this a dangerous fact for humanity. The fact that natural or moral evil often overcomes the ability of the sufferer

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64. “Only the most fatuous would claim that, in each single case, God steps in and . . . says, ‘All right. It’s time you contracted Alzheimer’s.’ But it’s beyond dispute that, if an intelligent Creator is responsible for the universe and all in it, that Creator freely chose one in which all those physical evils could occur.” O’Malley, 23.
to respond positively (or at all) to his suffering demonstrates the irresolvable conflict between the mass curse of original sin and the divine love for and individual redemption of each believer. In light of this contradiction, the pastoral use of facile explanations of redemptive suffering is understandable. But, rather than force its own clergy to concoct these partial, ineffective justifications, the Church could remove the root of the problem by abandoning the doctrine of original sin.

The two remaining major contradictions between original sin and other Church teachings relate to baptism. As discussed previously, the Church teaches unequivocally that the taint of original sin is universal and can be erased only by baptism. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that those who die without being baptized die without salvation. A longstanding objection to the harshness of this teaching has been that it appears to condemn to hell two groups of people who would seem not to deserve such a fate: (1) righteous non-Christians who, as a practical matter, were never exposed to the gospels and could never have become Christian; and (2) infants who die before baptism.

The Church has struggled mightily to explain the notion of a loving God who, because of original sin, condemns such people to eternal suffering.

As to each of these groups, the Church has reached a compromise solution that, in effect, contradicts original sin. Regarding righteous non-Christians, the Church has rejected the “exclusivist” position that they cannot be saved because they were not

65. Tilley argues that all theodicies are “impractical,” i.e., not intended to “respond[ ] to actual problems.” Tilley, 229. Adams acknowledges this as well. Adams, 184-86. Thiel notes that, in practice, pastors use “providential explanations” of evil as “a kind of emotional sop.” Thiel, 68-75.
baptized. Instead, the Second Vatican Council adopted the “inclusivist” view that righteous non-Christians are, in fact, saved through Jesus, even though they do not know it during their lifetimes. 66 “It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.” 67 Putting aside the logical and moral problems with this teaching, the relevant point here is that it is not consistent with original sin. One of Augustine’s most crucial and persuasive arguments in favor of original sin was based on the apostolic tradition of infant baptism for remission of sins: Augustine characterized this as proof that baptism into the Christian faith is an absolute necessity for overcoming some form of hereditary (not committed) sin. 68 Otherwise, against what sin could baptism be effective in babies who are not old enough to be moral actors? This pointed appeal to the oldest of Christian traditions helped Augustine prevail over the Pelagian view that Christ was not a necessity for salvation. 69 But the teaching of Vatican II, while making valiant efforts to stay true to the Augustinian


67. Catechism, 1260.


tradition by expanding the concept of “baptism,” is irreconcilable with the necessity of Christian baptism to erase original sin. They cannot both be correct: If original sin is the universal taint that the Church says it is, and it can only be remitted through Jesus, it cannot be erased simply by living a righteous life.\textsuperscript{70} To say otherwise is Pelagian heresy.

As to unbaptized infants, I have noted this theological conflict above and will analyze it at length in chapter 4. Briefly, even Augustine recognized the potential distastefulness of consigning unbaptized babies to eternal damnation, such that he suggested that they might reside in a “mild” hell.\textsuperscript{71} In medieval times, some within the Church advocated for the solution of “limbo” — an afterlife so mild that it is not even truly in hell.\textsuperscript{72} Others responded that the doctrine of original sin made no allowances for sympathy; we are all tainted, and we all go to hell unless cleansed, regardless of whether we have committed personal sin.

In 2007, the Church officially renounced limbo as a theologically suspect response to the question of infants who die before baptism. In its place, the Church adopted the position that the fate of such infants after death is unknown, but that the faith community should pray and hope that they are saved. This teaching — which is

\textsuperscript{70} “[I]f it is no longer understood that man is in a state of alienation, . . . one no longer understands the necessity of Christ the Redeemer. The whole structure of faith is threatened by this.” Ratzinger, \textit{Ratzinger Report}, 79; Council of Trent, 3-4; \textit{Catechism}, 1215; Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 167.


the subject of chapter 4 of this thesis and with which I wholeheartedly agree — is irreconcilable on its face with the doctrine of original sin. If original sin is correct, there is no hope for the salvation of the unbaptized dead.

D. Harms Caused by the Original Sin Doctrine

The foregoing sections of this chapter described deep flaws in the doctrine of original sin, including some of its deficiencies and its contradictions. But doctrinal flaws, without more, matter only to theologians. The relevant question for the Church hierarchy at large, as well as the faith community, is whether these flaws make any difference in religious practice. Original sin has been taught for millennia, and a conservative institution such as the Church will not abandon it without good cause. There must be more than just theoretical problems to spur a change.

Practical problems exist, and they are grave. The teaching of original sin causes at least four real-world harms: (1) It magnifies human suffering by blaming the sufferer for his suffering; (2) it prevents psychological healing by inhibiting the sufferer from freely expressing his pain; (3) it denigrates, both openly and tacitly, women and procreative sexuality; and (4) it calls into question the Church’s teaching authority and the greater magisterium. As discussed below, any of these would be sufficient grounds

73. As one observer of the Church recently noted in response to critics who seek changes in the Church’s policy on birth control, “Catholicism can and does change, but trying to guess how and when is almost always a fool’s errand,” because critics chronically “underestimate[] the capacity of the Catholic Church to resist change and to stand its ground.” John L. Allen Jr., “The Pope Vs. The Pill,” New York Times, July 27, 2008.
for the Church to set aside original sin, but, in combination, they make doing so a
virtual necessity.

First, in purporting to explain suffering, original sin intensifies it. At its heart,
original sin boils down to the simple teaching that you suffer because you are a sinner.
Your sin may be personal, or it may be innate in your human nature; it may be
something you did, or it may be something your far-distant ancestors did that has been
mysteriously passed down to you. Either way, you bear the taint of sin, and that is why
you suffer and will die. This teaching intensifies suffering because it adds guilt and
shame on top of the underlying painful event. For example, consider a very young child
who develops leukemia and must suffer agonizing treatment, plus possible deformity
and lifelong sterility even if the treatment is successful. The Church’s primary
theological response to the child’s mother, should she ask the Church why God would
permit such a thing, is that her two-year-old son, who has never harmed a soul, is
subject to leukemia because he has a defective and sin-laden human nature that he
inherited from his parents. Or perhaps, if the mother were to ask about her own
suffering in this situation, the response might suggest that she has committed serious
transgressions, as Thomas Aquinas argued is usually the explanation in such
situations.74 Even if not, she is concupiscent (both by definition through her human
nature and as evidenced by the sex act that must have preceded the birth of the now-

74. In response to the argument that some innocent infants suffer, while some evil adults do not,
Aquinas wrote that the infants suffer “on account of some sins of the parents. . . . [I]t is not unreasonable
that the child should be punished corporally for the sin of the father.” Aquinas, On Evil, 223.
suffering child), and therefore she must have sinned during her life, in addition to bearing the original sin of Adam and Eve. Such a response, I would argue, is unlikely to alleviate the mother’s spiritual or emotional pain, and is far more likely to intensify it.  She would feel guilt for having participated in causing her child’s suffering, as well as shame that her sins are being so publicly proven by the agonies of her baby. Furthermore, after consulting the Church and receiving this response as the product of its 2,000 years of contemplation, would the mother not feel that God is an unfair and unloving deity, with a Church to match? That crisis of faith would only make her suffering worse.

Indeed, the idea that a religious institution would offer a theory like the original sin doctrine to someone undergoing an event involving real physical or emotional pain is shocking. But it is not without precedent. Of the forty-two chapters in the Book of Job — the Bible’s most detailed and sophisticated analysis of the problem of evil — roughly thirty-four of them are devoted to Job’s “friends” explaining to him that his sufferings *must* be the result of his sins, because the friends understand their religion to teach that that is where suffering comes from. No matter how vociferously Job protests that he has done nothing to merit the evils visited on him, his friends insist that he must be wrong. The reader, of course, knows that Job is right — that he truly does

75. “God’s ‘wrath’ has, too often, been invoked in ways that do little credit to God and immense hurt to men and women.” Harrington, 54.

76. E.g., Job 22:5. “[E]ach [friend] . . . tries to convince [Job] that since he has been struck down by such varied and terrible sufferings, he must have done something seriously wrong. For suffering — they say — always strikes a man as punishment for a crime; it is sent by the absolutely just God and finds its reason in the order of justice.” John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 10.
not deserve his suffering.\textsuperscript{77} And, in the end, Job is vindicated: God says to the friends, the defenders of the suffering-as-punishment school, that they “have not spoken of [God] what is right, as . . . Job has.”\textsuperscript{78} While all manner of biblical scholars, theologians, and laypeople can reasonably disagree on what response, if any, the Book of Job provides to the problem of evil, one of its lessons is undeniable: The range of appropriate responses to suffering does \textit{not} include telling the sufferer that God has inflicted pain on him as punishment for his sins.\textsuperscript{79}

The doctrine of original sin is not identical to the traditional theodicy that God condemns in the Book of Job. Original sin is worse. Job’s friends insist that Job, as a grown man, must have committed some sins during his lifetime, as all adults have done. The friends’ error is in equating those sins with suffering, both as a matter of divine

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{77} “[J]ob was blameless and upright . . . .” Job 1:1; Thiel 20-27. Job’s friends spoke “as if they cared more for winning [God’s] favours by passing right judgment than for saying the truth.” Kant, “On the Failure,” 292. Aquinas conceded that Job may have been “pure by human standards” but argued that, by God’s standards, he “was infected with the radical human tendencies toward evil” Eleanore Stump, “Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job,” in \textit{The Evidential Argument from Evil}, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Job 42:7. “God himself reproves Job’s friends for their accusations and recognizes that Job is not guilty . . . . Job has not been punished, there was no reason for inflicting a punishment on him.” John Paul II, \textit{Salvifici Doloris}, 11. “[W]e would do well to remember God’s own judgment on those most ancient theodists, Job’s friends.” Thiel, 63.
  \item \textsuperscript{79} “I ask then: does [original sin] differ essentially from that of Job’s friends, who explain to the suffering just man the justice of his sufferings?” Ricoeur, “Original Sin,” 281; Burrell, 10-16, 125-26; Adams, 185. “[I]t is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment.” John Paul II, \textit{Salvifici Doloris}, 11, 15. “[T]he warning of the Book of Job [is] never to write theodicies . . . .” Tilley, 245. It is therefore not surprising that “a key part of . . . theodicy as a discourse practice is its effacement of the Book of Job.” Ibid., 89. No readings from Job are included in the Catholic liturgy, primarily because “texts that present real difficulties are avoided for pastoral reasons. The difficulties may be . . . that the texts themselves raise profound literary, critical, or exegetical problems; or the difficulties may lie, at least to a certain extent, in the ability of the faithful to understand the texts.” National Conference of Catholic Bishops, \textit{Sundays, Solemnities, Feasts of the Lord and the Saints}, vol. 1 of \textit{Lectionary for Mass} (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 76.
\end{itemize}
action (asserting that God chose to punish Job for them) and magnitude (saying that
Job’s trivial, quotidian sins justified the killing of all his children). The doctrine of
original sin embodies but extends well beyond these errors, because it imputes sin to
those who have not committed any wrongdoing. Under original sin, even a newborn at
the very moment of its birth is guilty of sin, and thereby subject to suffering. Augustine himself went so far as to suggest that Christian virgins who had been raped,
although apparently innocent, probably “had yet some lurking infirmity which might
have betrayed them into a proud and contemptuous bearing.” So, if Job were re-
written with the friends voicing the views of the Catholic Church, they would not only
insist that Job, as a concupiscent human, must have sinned personally, but also that he
would still merit his unthinkable suffering even if he had done absolutely nothing
wrong. This would have the same guilt/shame effect mentioned previously: Job would

80. Indeed, Augustine saw the “infantile imbecility” of newborns as proof of their sinfulness:
“For God ordained that infants should begin the world as the young of beasts begin it, since their parents [Adam and Eve] had fallen to the level of the beasts in the fashion of their life and of their death . . . .”
Augustine, City of God, XIII.3; Vanneste, 116-17. He accordingly railed against the tendency of parents to view “with affection” the actions of these “small freaks.” Augustine, On the Merits, I.66-67; Augustine, The Confessions, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New York City Press, 1997), I.7.11. I recognize that some theologians, including Karl Rahner, have argued for a more nuanced understanding of the state of original sin into which each infant is born. Rahner, Foundations, 106-15; Rahner, “Original Sin,” 330-32; Thiel, 120-22; Domning, 16; Duffy, 609-21. Such views, however, have not gained official acceptance within the Church hierarchy, which continues to insist on the traditional interpretation. Ratzinger, Ratzinger Report, 80; Ratzinger, In the Beginning, 72; McBrien, 185.

81. Augustine, City of God, I.28. Aquinas was equally unambiguous: “According to the Catholic Faith, we must hold without any doubt whatever that death and all such ills of the present life are punishment of original sin.” Aquinas, On Evil, 221-22. More recently, Charles Journet recommended to those who believe they are suffering innocently: “[A]sk your conscience whether you really are innocent. You will find that . . . you are to blame in a thousand . . . ways. You are a sinner.” Journet, 235-36.

82. “For every man, however laudably he lives, yet yields in some points to the lust of the flesh.” Augustine, City of God, I.9.
feel guilty for having brought death upon his children by his sins, and shame that all his friends can see how sinful he is by the magnitude of his suffering.\textsuperscript{83} Job would suffer more after having asked his friends for solace than he did before he spoke to them.

The Church notes, however, that this is not the whole story. First, the Bible has more to say about suffering than just Job, and its views are highly varied. Among them, there is substantial support in some of the prophets and other books for the proposition that suffering results from sin.\textsuperscript{84} So it would not be fair to allege that blaming a sufferer for his own suffering is patently anti-scriptural. Second, and more importantly from a Christian perspective, the presentation of the doctrine of original sin is never complete without emphasizing that Jesus came and died and was resurrected so that each person might conquer suffering and death. Original sin and the resurrection cannot be separated, and the gloom of the former must always be viewed in the warm light of the latter. The Church is right to emphasize this portion of the narrative, and I do not deny its hope-giving possibilities. In fact, as I argue in chapter 4, it can be a truly compelling account in the context of suffering, so much so that the Church should present it as the primary or sole response to evil, not as a parallel or corollary to original sin.

\textsuperscript{83} “This just adds insult (‘you must be a very great sinner’) to the injury . . . that he has already suffered . . . .” Thomas F. Tracey, “The Lawfulness of Nature and the Problem of Evil,” in Murphy, Russell, and Stoeger, 156.

\textsuperscript{84} Hick, \textit{Evil}, 172-73; Pagels, 145-46; John Paul II, \textit{Salvifici Doloris}, 10; Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 221-22; Prov. 10:27; Jer. 7:12; Rom. 6:23. Pagels also notes, however, that Jesus himself criticized those who leapt to the conclusion that people who suffer must be greater sinners than those who do not. Lk. 13:4-5.
I also recognize that, even though it is the official teaching of the Church, few pastoral priests would present the formal doctrine of original sin as their actual response to a grieving parishioner. They are far more likely to present platitudes of the “God called him up to heaven” or “The Lord never gives us a burden heavier than we can carry” variety.\(^{85}\) As noted previously, I do not fault clergy for preferring such vague statements over the doctrine of original sin. But when the priests on the front lines find themselves unable to tell members of their flock the putatively infallible truth that Church has promulgated in response to the precise situation at hand, there must be something wrong with this supposed truth. Where it is nonetheless preached, the doctrine of original sin is likely to increase suffering, which is a real and inexcusable harm — an institutional moral evil in its own right.\(^{86}\)

The second way that original sin inflicts harm is by silencing sufferers. Terrance Tilley has made this argument convincingly as to all theodicies, including original sin.\(^{87}\) Tilley’s argument is based largely on the fact that all theodicies are ultimately ineffective because they are flawed: None of them can actually provide the answer that a sufferer seeks.\(^{88}\) So the most that any theodicy could ever hope to do is temporarily reduce an individual’s suffering by transferring responsibility for it from

\(^{85}\) Stern, 70, 78. Neither of these, of course, is theologically true; we never have any proof if a deceased person has been called to heaven, and people certainly do receive burdens they cannot bear.

\(^{86}\) “[E]ngaging in the discourse practice of theodicy creates evils . . . .” Tilley, 3.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 101-10.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 232, 249-50.
God or the sufferer to an external source (such as a primordial couple who lived thousands of years ago). By doing so, a theodicy can give the sufferer a surface-level reason to continue her faith in God, and direct her anger or frustration towards the external source rather than towards herself, thereby maintaining the beneficial effects of faith and possibly numbing some of the pain.  

But this is nothing more than a spiritual opiate that, like any narcotic, wears off.  

Given sufficient time and reflection, any person of faith provided with a theodicy will become aware of its flaws.  

When told that all human suffering is attributable to the fall of Adam and Eve, a believing Catholic may at first accept this explanation and derive some limited benefit from it. But if the suffering continues, it is nearly inevitable that other questions will arise.  

The sufferer will wonder about the fairness of original sin: Why God is holding me responsible for a sin I did not commit and could not prevent?  

The sufferer will wonder about the magnitude of the sin: Is my vicarious

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89. Pagels, 146-49. Pagels hypothesizes that some believers “would rather feel guilty than helpless,” so that “[i]f guilt is the price to be paid for the illusion of control over nature . . . many people have seemed willing to pay it.” Ibid.

90. Tilley, 248.

91. One author notes that the massive success of Harold Kushner’s book may be an indication that “everyday Christians and Jews” have already ceased the “taking for granted of the traditional theodicy.” Barry L. Whitney, What Are They Saying About God and Evil? (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 75.

92. “[W]henever [original sin] has been freely probed . . . its radical incoherence has become all too evident.” Hick, Evil, 62.

93. “[A]lmost always the individual enters suffering with a typically human protest and with the question ‘why.’ . . . Certainly he often puts this question to God, and to Christ.” John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris, 26.
participation in the sin of Adam and Eve so bad as to justify the current pain in my life? The sufferer will question her inability to end suffering by atoning for original sin: What can I do to show God my heartfelt remorse, so that God will lift the penance God has imposed? Like Job, one who is experiencing evil will not long be satisfied with the traditional response. Once the sedative effect fades, the sufferer is back to square one, asking the Church for more answers, and receiving only partial responses that may actually intensify the suffering.

Thus, even when original sin is at its most effective as an explanation of evil, all it can do is silence the sufferer for a time. It temporarily reduces her complaints to God and the Church, however justified those complaints might be. It teaches that the proper object of anger is something other than God, and the sufferer would be theologically wrong to protest one’s innocence to the divine (even though Job himself protested vociferously and successfully). This silencing effect of original sin is a harm unto itself, for it suppresses the open expressions of anger, grief, and pain that modern science tells us are critical for psychological — and possibly physical — healing. Like

94. Augustine argued that, in light of all the benefits bestowed on Adam and Eve and the relative ease with which they could have obeyed God’s one command, their sin was not “a small and light one.” Augustine, City of God, XIV.12. “Whoever thinks such punishment either excessive or unjust shows his inability to measure the great iniquity of sinning where sin might so easily have been avoided.” Ibid., XIV.15; Aquinas, On Evil, 169, 177. As Hick notes, this idea of punishing the entire human race for the sin of Adam and Eve is hardly something that believers today would recognize as a theodicy. Hick, Evil, 249-50.

95. Burrell, 115-16. “Christian faith does not call for passive submission to suffering; that would be tantamount to the sacrifice of our autonomous freedom and dignity before God.” Paul G. Crowley, Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope (New York: Continuum, 2005), 12.

Job’s friends, the doctrine of original sin tries to stop the sufferer from complaining.\textsuperscript{97} When it works, therefore, this teaching has some temporary beneficial effect but also impedes the healing process; when it does not work, it adds guilt and shame to the underlying evil. Given enough time, it inevitably will not work. Original sin, therefore, can only reduce healing and/or increase suffering in the long run.

The third detrimental effect of original sin is misogyny: The doctrine has caused and abetted massive suffering of women. The primary cause of such suffering is the Church’s long tradition of teaching not a co-equal, basically simultaneous original sin of Adam and Eve, but rather a first original sin of Eve and a subsequent original sin of Adam.\textsuperscript{98} For centuries, the Church explained that Eve was deceived by the serpent into sinning; then, having committed her sin, she sexually tempted Adam into joining her.\textsuperscript{99} Once they had both sinned and lost the state of original holiness, their sex acts propagated their defective states to all of us.

The elements of falsity in this theory — which is similar to the myth of Pandora and other golden-age narratives ascribing the fall of humanity to a primordial woman — are so monumental that I cannot do them full justice here. I will briefly note two, simply to highlight the absurdity of the teaching. First, the idea of Eve using sex to

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 101-10.

\textsuperscript{98} Wiley, 155-56, 171-72; Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XIII.14, XIV.11; Augustine, \textit{Enchiridion}, XXVI; Augustine, \textit{On the Merits}, I.56; Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 200-01; Anselm, 182-83; Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I-II.81.v; 1 Tim. 2:14. “If the man had been able to resist the woman’s persuasion, it would have been sufficient to excuse him from actual sin . . . .” Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 214.

\textsuperscript{99} Mary Daly, \textit{Beyond God the Father} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 44-47; Mary Daly, \textit{The Church and the Second Sex} (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 34-46; Noddings, 19-20, 51-57.
tempt Adam into the committing the originating original sin is nonsensical, for the doctrine of original sin teaches that sex before the fall was not a source of temptation. It was not until after and because of the fall that sexuality became a subject of concupiscence, and libido thereby gained the power to overcome human reason and intellect.\textsuperscript{100} So, under the Augustinian view of pre-lapsarian life, Eve could have exerted every womanly charm she possessed, but none of them would have affected Adam in the least, much less inspired him to disobey the direct command of God.

Second, the notion of Eve as temptress has no basis in Genesis. The relevant biblical passage says, in its entirety, that Eve “took of [the] fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.”\textsuperscript{101} Although some of the Greek scriptures understand this passage to teach that Eve directly capitulated to the serpent’s deception while Adam did not,\textsuperscript{102} the idea of Eve tempting Adam (much less tempting him sexually) is a bizarre gloss with no support in the text. No contemporary scholarship finds in Genesis 3:6 any reference to temptation, sexual or otherwise.

Nonetheless, Eve’s temptation of Adam was a longstanding corollary to the doctrine of original sin, and it put down deep roots in the Church’s tradition. That temptation has generated countless sermons, homilies, and writings evincing vicious

\textsuperscript{100} “Away, I say, with the thought, that before there was any sin, there should already have been committed . . . the very sin which our Lord warns us against regarding a woman . . . .” Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XIV.10, XIV.3, XIV.21-24; Pagels, 110-12. Indeed, Augustine insisted that Adam and Eve had no emotions whatsoever prior to the fall. Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XIV.10.

\textsuperscript{101} Gen. 3:6.

\textsuperscript{102} 1 Tim. 2:14; 2 Cor. 11:3.
hostility towards women. A prime example is the famous Dominican witch-hunting manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. In attempting to show that belief in the existence of witchcraft is consistent with Catholic dogma, the *Malleus* asks “Why is it that Women are chiefly addicted to Evil superstitions?” The answer, it says, is that “though the devil tempted Eve to sin, yet Eve seduced Adam,” and “the Scriptures have much that is evil to say about women . . . because of the first temptress, Eve, and her imitators.” To anyone who would claim that doctrinal problems discussed in this thesis have no practical significance, I would note that these quoted statements were invoked in the context of justifying the torture and burning alive of women. Merely ceasing to engage in such grotesque activities is not enough. The misogyny of today may take on different outward manifestations, but this does not relieve the Church of its obligation to continue to rid the world of the false theological teachings that misogynists employ to rationalize their actions. The doctrine of original sin and its historical association with women as evil temptresses is such a teaching.

In addition to blaming Eve (and thereby women in general) for all worldly suffering, the anti-sexual undertones of the doctrine of original sin have had their own

103. “No doubt it must be granted that the story gives evidence of a very masculine resentment, which serves to justify that state of dependence in which all, or almost all, societies have kept women.” Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 254; Noddings, 52. “Male theologians have used the doctrine of original sin to denigrate women, blame them for evil, and prohibit them from full participations in the life of the church.” Wiley, 178.


105. Noddings, 44-47.
negative effects on women through the centuries. As discussed previously, the Church takes no formal position on how original sin is transmitted to each person, but there is a wealth of theological material, beginning with Augustine himself, stating or implying that propagation of original sin derives from the sexual act of conception. And the Church teaches unambiguously that the desire for sex, even if it results in procreation, is a direct remnant of original sin, so all sexual desire, regardless of the context, is sinful and shameful. Outside the context of original sin, however, the Church views conception positively — an expression of love and a fulfillment of God’s command to be fruitful and multiply. The result is confusion and doctrinal ambivalence, in which the Church praises conception, yet appears to look askance at how it happens.

106. “From the fifth century on, Augustine’s pessimistic views of sexuality, politics, and human nature would become the dominant influence on western Christianity . . . and color all western culture, Christian or not, ever since.” Pagels, 150; M. Daly, Church, 21, 34-35, 144; Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 94-99.

107. “Justly is shame very specially connected with [sexual] lust . . . .” Augustine, City of God, XIV.17-19; Augustine, Enchiridion, XXVI. Original sin “has put the body and sexuality in a reprehensible light.” Haring, 36.


109. “[J]ust as in men there cannot be copulation without inordinate concupiscence, so there cannot be conception without sin.” Aquinas, On Evil, 193, 198; Anselm, 180-81; Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Supp.41.iii-iv. Augustine was fully aware of this tension, which he viewed as further proof that the link between “lust” and procreation was a product of original sin. Augustine, City of God, XIV.16, XIV.21-24. But “virtually no one today follows Augustine in viewing the procreative act as sinful per se . . . . Such a view finds no support anywhere else in Scripture . . . .” Blocher, 27-28. Rather, scholars have noted that Augustine’s views of sex arose in the context of his own struggle to maintain celibacy. Thiel, 117-19.
Indeed, “Catholic guilt” regarding sex has long served as fodder for stand-up comedians and the like. As a theological and pastoral issue, however, it is no laughing matter. The issue goes to the heart of human nature, with results that are difficult to justify theologically (particularly for an all-male, generally celibate clergy). The doctrine of original sin teaches that the only reason that a human being desires sexual relations with another is because of the sin of Adam and Eve.\(^{110}\) While the physical expression of love is a positive aspect of marriage, the underlying urge is sinful, and so giving into it must be sinful as well, just as it is sinful to give in to prideful urges by boasting, or to give in to angry urges by fighting. In short, the Church equivocates, teaching that sexual desire is a manifestation of original sin, while sex is otherwise a marriage benefit. This is a very fine line to draw, and it can hardly be surprising that believers end up deeply conflicted about sex.\(^{111}\)

Admittedly, the Church has taken steps to rectify these problems. John Paul II’s first major theological excursion as Pope was devoted to “the theology of the body,”

\(^{110}\) To Aquinas, this is an easy case: “[E]very use of [genital] members which is not proportionate to the generation of offspring . . . is . . . inordinate,” and all “inordinate desire” is “lust,” which is sinful. Aquinas, On Evil, 426, 432.

\(^{111}\) Original sin “inevitably le[ads] to intensified self-questioning . . . on matters of sexuality . . . .” Gonsalv K. Mainberger, “Original Sin as a ‘Cultural Matrix’ Today 2,” in Boureux and Theobald, 103. “[W]hat needs to be abandoned is disseminating the discourse system of patriarchy, loathing the body, and construing just as the primary evidence of evil.” Tilley, 135. “The concept that the natural action of human sexual[ity] is a divine punishment for Adam’s sin has had profound influences on later Christianity. It is responsible for the teaching that sex for pleasure, even in marriage, is somewhat sinful, a view that endured up until modern times.” Korsmeyer, 35-36. Thiel argues that it is “counterintuitive” to see sex — which, unlike death, many enjoy — as a “marker of sin’s universality.” Thiel, 117-19.
including the theology of women and sexuality. He explained that martial sexuality is a good, no less so than clerical celibacy. In a similarly progressive vein, the Church appears to have abandoned the notion of Eve as a temptress: Neither the Catechism nor any other recent Church document on the issue makes an explicit distinction between the sin of Eve and the sin of Adam, although neither do they explicitly disavow the earlier interpretation.

Such modifications are valuable developments in the struggle to undo the wounds caused by the doctrine of original sin. After centuries of propagating gender-based oppression, however, these tacit steps are too little and too late to redeem the underlying doctrine from the taint of its historical application. Merely allowing some misogyny to drop out of the teachings of the Church is not enough to rectify the damage that has been done. In any event, some vestiges of the Church’s patriarchal teachings remain in original sin and its corollary doctrines. For example, the Church steadfastly maintains the teaching of the immaculate conception of Mary. This doctrine, which lacks any significant scriptural basis, has no reason to exist other than to resolve the


“problem” of original sin as it relates to Jesus’ being born to a woman — a woman whom the Church teaches remained a virgin for her entire life.\textsuperscript{115} In part to preserve the virginity of Mary from inevitable human concupiscence, the Church teaches that she was not, in fact, concupiscent at all, because God removed from her the stain of original sin immediately upon her conception.\textsuperscript{116} Thus is Mary’s “purity” maintained. In fact, it has long served as the role model for Catholic women: Bear a good son, but do not desire or have sex.\textsuperscript{117} This unattainable paradigm presents a fundamentally mixed message to women regarding their sexuality, presenting them, at heart, as sex objects (i.e., conceivers of children) who are, ideally, virginal. Such impossibilities hearken back to the notion of Eve as temptress: As a perpetual virgin, Mary serves as the sexless counterpart to and antithesis of Eve, just as Jesus is the sinless new Adam.\textsuperscript{118}

As demonstrated by the Church’s preservation of the problematic immaculate conception, the doctrine of original sin has not been — and, for at least the foreseeable future, cannot be — separated from its history of detrimental effects on women. Gender-based difficulties are inherent in original sin because of the doctrine’s

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Catechism, 499; Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, III.28.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Catechism, 491; Augustine, \textit{On the Merits}, I.56.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} “[Mary] helps everyone — especially women — to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other.” John Paul II, \textit{Theology of the Body}, 467-68; Noddings 83-84; John Paul II, \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, 17-21. “[W]omen are encouraged to identify with this image of Mary, and to do so has devastating effects . . . contributing to the conditioning of women to adore and serve man.” M. Daly, \textit{Church}, 19-20, 118-123, 132-34. “The charge might be made today that . . . Mary’s image will be . . . used theologically to sanction and perpetuate this older and today in many respects dubious image.” Rahner, \textit{Faith and Ministry}, 216.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Catechism, 411. “Eve was balanced off by Mary.” M. Daly, \textit{Church}, 46.
\end{itemize}
patriarchal development and interpretation over the course of centuries. Merely tinkering with it now to moderate these problems is inadequate.\textsuperscript{119} There is little benefit in pruning the most misogynistic branches of the doctrine when its trunk is infected with the same rot.

Finally, by teaching original sin, not only does the Church harm its followers (female and male), it also harms itself. Each of the theological inconsistencies and implausible teachings discussed above ultimately diminishes the confidence of the laity in the doctrinal authority of the Church. As Tilley notes, the Church’s assertions regarding matters of faith are likely to be followed only as long as Catholics have faith in the accuracy of the Church’s pronouncements on these issues.\textsuperscript{120} In a post-Enlightenment world, where individual believers take for granted their right to judge for themselves the validity of doctrinal pronouncements, being provided with self-contradictory articles of faith must necessarily cause believers to question the Church’s abilities.\textsuperscript{121} And when substantial doubt has been introduced as to the veracity of a particular doctrine, the laity will question not just that teaching, but also the overall sincerity — and, thereby, the authority — of the Church’s theologians.\textsuperscript{122} Thus, each

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\item\textsuperscript{119} “The task of exorcising this demon is one of the great challenges of our era. It can be said with justice that the Church has failed to rise to this challenge.” M. Daly, \textit{Church}, 134; Wiley, 175.
\item\textsuperscript{120} Tilley, 38-40.
\item\textsuperscript{121} “[I]t is well known that concerning this question [of evil] there not only arise many frustrations and conflicts in the relations of man with God, but it also happens that people reach the point of actually denying God.” John Paul II, \textit{Salvifici Doloris}, 9.
\item\textsuperscript{122} Tilley, 38-40.
\end{enumerate}
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aspect of the doctrine of original sin that either conflicts with other Church doctrines or is difficult to accept on its face diminishes the Church’s authority.\textsuperscript{123} When this diminishment reaches a sufficient level, followers begin to disregard the Church’s teachings. At a certain point, they simply leave the Church. As Cardinal Ratzinger wrote prior to his elevation, “the inability to understand ‘original sin’ and to make it understandable is really one of the most difficult problems of present-day theology and pastoral ministry.”\textsuperscript{124}

It is possible that the Church would rather have five hundred million members, all of whom accept its teachings without question, than one billion members who express doubt and challenge the hierarchy when its pronouncements are lacking. But I doubt that this is so. In any event, it is a false dichotomy, for the doctrine of original sin, which chases so many Catholics into the realm of disbelief, need not be retained in the magisterium. In the next chapter, I show that there is an unquestionably valid and completely orthodox Catholic doctrine that could supplant original sin as the Church’s response to the problem of evil.

\textsuperscript{123} “[T]he Catholic Church has on its books . . . a doctrine which in its traditional formulation simply invites disbelief and rejection.” G. Daly, 97. Writing from a pastoral point of view, Benedict Groeschel opines that “the worst” of all of the Church’s failures “is to have one’s loved ones led astray and taught error by those who represent the Church.” Groeschel, 65-66.

\textsuperscript{124} Ratzinger, \textit{Ratzinger Report}, 79. Paul Ricoeur is less forgiving: “The harm that has been done to souls, during the centuries of Christianity, first by the literal interpretation of the story of Adam, and then by the confusion of this myth, treated as history, with later speculations, principally Augustinian, about original sin, will never adequately be told. In asking the faithful to confess belief in this mytho-speculative mass and to accept it as a self-sufficient explanation, the theologians have unduly required a \textit{sacrificum intellectus} where what was needed was to awaken believers to a symbolic superintelligence of their actual condition.” Ricoeur, \textit{Symbolism}, 239.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE NEW DOCTRINE: PRAYERFUL HOPE

If we set ourselves with the believing and praying Church . . . , then we can begin to understand what original sin, inherited sin, is and also what the protection against this inherited sin is, what redemption is. — Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception*

On January 19, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI approved for publication a lengthy document addressing whether the taint of original sin condemns infants who die unbaptized to spend eternity without salvation. This document, entitled *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*, was drafted by the International Theological Commission (“ITC”), a subcommittee of the Church’s warden of orthodoxy, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.¹ Although *The Hope of Salvation* received significant mainstream press attention when it was issued,² theologians have written almost nothing about it. This has been an oversight, for *The Hope of Salvation* represents an important development in Church doctrine: It takes a first official step away from the traditional view of original sin, shifting the Church’s doctrinal emphasis from the sinfulness of humanity to God’s desire for universal

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¹. Regarding the ITC in general, see John Paul II, *Tredecim Anni* (1982), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu.proprio/index.htm. The ITC’s pronouncements do not carry the same doctrinal weight as those of the CDF.

salvation. In this chapter, I discuss the how the reasoning and conclusions of *The Hope of Salvation* break with longstanding teachings regarding infants who die, and I demonstrate that the Church can and should apply the same reasoning and conclusions to the problem of evil as a whole.

A. *The Hope of Salvation*

As discussed previously, the question of whether the universal taint of original sin means that infants are banned from heaven if they die before baptism has dogged the Church since original sin was first proposed. Theologians and pastoral priests alike have questioned whether the damnation of babies is consistent with the existence of a truly benevolent God who desires universal salvation.³ *The Hope of Salvation* is therefore a response to the “many pastors of souls [who] have asked for a deeper reflection” on the interaction between original sin and salvation in the context of unbaptized infants.⁴

*The Hope of Salvation* begins by acknowledging candidly that “people find it increasingly difficult to accept that God is just and merciful if he excludes infants, who have no personal sins, from eternal happiness.”⁵ The document notes that this problem arises acutely in the case of aborted fetuses, as well as infants born into non-Christian traditions, neither of whom have any realistic opportunity to be baptized before they

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³. “Do infants deserve condemnation for the propensity [to sin] which is born in them? Many thinkers are indignant at the mere idea, though it has long been affirmed by the church.” Blocher, 23; Trooster, 1.

⁴. *Hope of Salvation*, 3.

⁵. Ibid., 2.
Yet the ITC acknowledges that the traditional understanding of the universality of original sin, in combination with the absolute necessity of baptism for salvation, seem to suggest that even these most faultless unbaptized souls are denied any heavenly reward.\footnote{Ibid., 2. Even Augustine recognized the acute harshness of his doctrine in the case of abortions, noting that he “fail[ed] to see why . . . they should not attain to the resurrection of the dead.” Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XXII.13.}

\textit{The Hope of Salvation} notes that, in response to this dilemma, “the common Catholic teaching until the mid-20th century”\footnote{“Original sin implies a state of separation from Christ, and that excludes the possibility of the vision of God for those who die in that state.” \textit{Hope of Salvation}, 3. “There seems to be a tension between . . . the universal salvific will of God on the one side, and the necessity of sacramental Baptism on the other.” Ibid., 10.} was a compromise: Unbaptized infants were said to spend eternity in “limbo,” where they would be deprived of the beatific vision of God but would not suffer the torments of hell.\footnote{Ibid., 26.} \textit{The Hope of Salvation} argues that limbo became the Church’s \textit{de facto} teaching in large part because Popes and councils were reluctant to take an explicit position favoring either the condemnation or the salvation of unbaptized infants.\footnote{Ibid., 18-25. Aquinas referred to this as “the mildest of all punishments.” Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 212. “[S]uch infants as quit the body without being baptized will be involved in the mildest condemnation of all.” Augustine, \textit{On the Merits}, I.21.} The ITC notes, however, that the teaching of limbo did tacitly take a position on this issue: Because limbo excluded from heaven infants who lack any personal sin, the teaching implicitly gave original sin primacy over

\footnote{Hope of Salvation, 26, 70.}
universal salvation. In other words, those proposing limbo used as their baseline scenario the hard-line Augustinian view that dead infants must be in some state other than salvation, and only secondarily lessened the harshness of this teaching by downplaying the punishment that damnation normally would entail.

Like many attempts to reach compromises on matters of faith, this middle ground of limbo satisfied neither side of the debate. For those who were inclined to emphasize the goodness of God and universal salvation over the doctrine of original sin, the idea that infants would be permanently excluded from heaven was no more just than sending them to hell outright. For those tending to place primary emphasis on the taint of original sin, any form of lessened punishment on account of the supposed “innocence” of an infant was not only factually erroneous (because infants are not “innocent” of original sin), but also heretical, given the Church’s unambiguous condemnation of Pelagianism. Limbo, therefore, had few supporters as a theological

11. Ibid., 22.

12. Ibid., 21-24. Stephen Duffy characterizes this result as “more merciful if less logical” than the strict Augustinian doctrine. Duffy, 604.

13. “There are those who at heart are unwilling to grant that infants who die without Baptism ought to be condemned simply on account of lack of justice . . . .” Anselm, 209-10. “[T]he Augustinian tradition . . . presents what . . . would seem to be a ‘restrictive’ conception of the universality of God’s saving will.” Hope of Salvation, 33.

14. “[I]t is impossible for any human being affected by any sin, even a slight one, to be saved. Therefore, if . . . original sin is some kind of sin, it is necessary that every human being born in it be condemned unless it is remitted.” Anselm, 209-10. “Nor is there any middle place for any man, and so a man can only be with the devil who is not with Christ.” Augustine, On the Merits, I.55, I.21-26, I.35, I.56. As The Hope of Salvation paraphrases the anti-Pelagian view, “[t]hose who are not baptized cannot enter the Kingdom of God. At the judgment, those who do not enter the Kingdom will be condemned to hell.” Hope of Salvation, 17, 35. Even in defending the idea of a mild hell for infants, Aquinas
principle.\textsuperscript{15}

After tracing this history, \textit{The Hope of Salvation} reaches a theological conclusion that, at the time of its announcement, made news around the world: Limbo probably does not exist.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The Hope of Salvation} argues that there is no scriptural support for limbo,\textsuperscript{17} that it was never incorporated into the Catholic liturgy,\textsuperscript{18} and that it was never “endorse[d] . . . as a doctrine of faith,” even by those Popes who propagated it.\textsuperscript{19} For these reasons, the ITC argued, the teaching of limbo is not entitled to the customary deference accorded to the Church’s longstanding traditions.

In addition to these rationales for not according limbo a presumption of validity, the ITC provided an affirmative doctrinal reason for rejecting it outright. Because the very hypothesis of limbo relies on the assumption that original sin prevents unbaptized infants from reaching heaven, \textit{The Hope of Salvation} concludes that limbo presents “an emphatically denounced as “abhorrent the error of the Pelagians who asserted that children were without sin and that they deserved no punishment.” Aquinas, \textit{On Evil}, 217.

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\textbf{15.} “One might . . . state that, all in all, no adequate answer has been produced to the Pelagian objections against the existence of original sin nor to the objections . . . that the Catholic doctrine of original sin was not radical enough.” Vanneste, 27. At least as early as 1985, then-Cardinal Ratzinger indicated his desire to eliminate the idea of limbo from Catholic theology. Ratzinger, \textit{Ratzinger Report}, 147-48.
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\textbf{16.} The ITC phrased its conclusion in a nuanced manner, stating that “we consider [limbo] problematic” and “[w]e believe that, in the development of doctrine, the solution in terms of Limbo can be surpassed.” \textit{Hope of Salvation}, 95; see also ibid., 90-91.
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\textbf{17.} “Limbo . . . has no clear foundation in revelation . . . .” Ibid., 3-4.
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\textbf{18.} Ibid., 5.
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\textbf{19.} Ibid., 26. \textit{The Hope of Salvation} also notes that the \textit{Catechism} contains no mention of limbo. Ibid., Introduction.
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unduly restrictive view of salvation,” in which baptism, instead of God, is the ultimate deciding factor of redemption.\textsuperscript{20} Thus, instead of continuing to perpetuate the view that the divine grace of salvation is dependent upon whether an infant undergoes a human sacramental act to erase original sin, the ITC “reaffirm[ed] the primacy of Christ and his grace, which has priority over Adam and sin.”\textsuperscript{21} In other words, after granting precedence to original sin for 1,600 years,\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Hope of Salvation} explicitly reversed the Church’s position, placing God’s love and desire for universal salvation ahead of humanity’s need to atone for Adam and Eve’s misdeed.

Because it addresses fundamental Church doctrines regarding death and salvation, this correction is of great theological importance, as I discuss later in this chapter. But, in addition to its theological substance, \textit{The Hope of Salvation} also exemplifies a profoundly different \textit{method} of discourse regarding Church’s response to the problem of evil. The document demonstrates that the Church can admit insufficiencies in its knowledge, without vague appeals to “mystery,” while still recommending to believers a meaningful course of belief and action. \textit{The Hope of Salvation} takes this approach in the context of its recommended response to the problem of unbaptized infants — a problem that, after all, is not resolved by the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid., 2, 18, 33, 91. “God's power is not restricted to the sacraments . . . .” Ibid., 82.
\item Ibid., 7. “We . . . stress that humanity’s solidarity with Christ . . . must have priority over the solidarity of human beings with Adam . . . .” Ibid., 91, 93.
\item Ibid., 93. “From Augustine onwards [original sin] was in fact linked with pessimistic feelings . . . and with a view of salvation as restricted in extent . . . [T]he universality of original sin was clearer than the universality of man’s redeemed condition . . . .” Rahner, “Original Sin,” 329.
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elimination of limbo. Rather than posit an answer to replace limbo, *The Hope of Salvation* admits that no answer is yet available, while also noting that scripture and the magisterium provide substantial reasons for believers to pray and hope that God’s salvific desire ultimately triumphs:

[T]he Church does not have sure knowledge about the salvation of unbaptised infants who die. . . . [T]he destiny of the generality of infants who die without Baptism has not been revealed to us, and the Church teaches and judges only with regard to what has been revealed. What we do positively know of God, Christ and the Church gives us grounds to hope for their salvation . . . .

The ITC thereby concedes that the Church does not know what happens to infants who die without baptism. Nonetheless, *The Hope of Salvation* then discusses, in substantial length and detail, the theological reasons that it may be possible for unbaptized infants to achieve salvation. These reasons include God’s desire for universal salvation, the Vatican II-recognized possibility of salvation even for unbaptized people who are ignorant of Christianity, and the power of God to effect the consequences of baptism in the absence of the sacramental act itself. In its ultimate analysis, however, the ITC does not argue that the salvation of unbaptized infants is a fact, but rather that there is reason to hold “prayerful hope” for such salvation:

Our conclusion is that the many factors that we have considered above give serious theological and liturgical grounds for hope that unbaptised infants who die will be saved and enjoy the Beatific Vision. We emphasise that these are reasons for prayerful hope, rather than grounds for sure knowledge. There is much that simply

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24. Ibid., 81-101.
has not been revealed to us. We live by faith and hope in the God of mercy and love who has been revealed to us in Christ, and the Spirit moves us to pray in constant thankfulness and joy.\footnote{Ibid., 102. The \textit{Catechism} had tentatively laid the groundwork for this conclusion, stating that “the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children, . . . allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism.” \textit{Catechism}, 1261; \textit{Hope of Salvation}, 101.}

This conclusion — i.e., that there is a well founded basis for hoping that God will answer prayers for the salvation of unbaptized infants — is the ultimate teaching of \textit{The Hope of Salvation}. Although the document disposes of limbo as a belief, there is no attempt to replace it or to provide other answers on this topic, about which “much . . . simply has not been revealed.” In short, the response is not a theodicy; it is a recommended course of action predicated on the fundamental belief that God desires and has the power to bring about the salvation of every human being.

\textbf{B. Applying Prayerful Hope to the Problem of Evil}

I refer to the entirety of ITC’s response to the question of unbaptized infants as the “prayerful hope” doctrine. As employed by \textit{The Hope of Salvation}, this doctrine can be broken down into four components: (1) acknowledging that there is currently no answer to the question; (2) disclaiming any attempt to provide a partial answer at this time; (3) rejecting traditional but erroneous answers; and (4) noting that, despite the current lack of knowledge, there are well-grounded reasons for hope regarding divine action in response to prayer. Although the ITC invokes prayerful hope only in the context of a particular subset of the problem of evil, my argument in this section is that the Church can and should use \textit{The Hope of Salvation} as a template for overhauling the
Church’s response to the problem of evil as a whole, with the ultimate goal of supplanting the doctrine of original sin with prayerful hope. Each of the four aspects of the ITC’s analysis of unbaptized infants can be applied to the problem of evil, with an end result superior to that currently achieved by teaching original sin.

The first aspect of prayerful hope — acknowledging that there is no “answer” to the underlying question — can be applied to the problem of evil without controversy. Indeed, the Church already admits that original sin, even when viewed in the context of the entire Christian narrative of redemption, does not truly “answer” the problem of evil. Applying prayerful hope in this respect would therefore require no doctrinal changes.

The second aspect of prayerful hope entails refusing to hazard partial guesses in the absence of sufficient knowledge and revelation from which to draw them. This differs from original sin, which repeatedly concedes that it operates in a field full of mystery, yet nonetheless proposes affirmative answers to the very unknowables that it cites as mysterious. Examples discussed previously include transmission-by-propagation, Satanic involvement in moral evil, and the ineffectiveness of baptism in removing the effects of original sin; in each of these areas, the Church has proposed a “solution” (e.g., transmission of original sin through seminal fluid), while admitting that it has no genuine theological reason to believe that the solution necessarily is correct. Such guesswork, as discussed in chapter 3, only renders the underlying problem more

impenetrable by adding layers of new mystery on top of the already-existing paradox.

In contrast, prayerful hope stops at the bounds of human knowledge and does not purport to go any further. This not only manifests the epistemological consistency that original sin lacks, but it also demonstrates intellectual modesty, applying human rationality to divine activity but recognizing the limits of inquiries into such activity.\footnote{27. “Good theologians never forget the knife-edge character of their journey, strung out between betraying the sacred by saying too much and abandoning their duty by surrendering to the beckoning silence. . . . Humility is the theologian’s byword on pain of irrelevance.” Wesley J. Wildman, “Incongruous Goodness, Perilous Beauty, Disconcerting Truth: Ultimate Reality and Suffering in Nature,” in Murphy, Russell, and Stoeger, 267. Regarding “suffering . . . we are conscious of the insufficiency and inadequacy of our explanations.” John Paul II, \textit{Salvifici Doloris}, 13. Although he defends the Augustinian tradition in general, even Blocher admits that “[w]hen no adequate solution is forthcoming, it is braver and wiser to acknowledge the fact than to hide behind a smokescreen of dubious arguments.” Blocher, 108.}

It shows the faith community that attempting to understand God is permissible and commendable, but claiming to know what one does not know is prideful and false. In sum, disposing of the Church’s partial answers to unanswerable questions regarding evil would simplify those questions, eliminate much current dogmatic confusion, and serve as a role model for other theological inquiries in this and other areas.

At this point in the transition from original sin to prayerful hope, a potential objection arises: Members of the faith community turn to the Church at times of crisis precisely for answers to the ultimate questions of human existence; if the Church does not provide even a \textit{partial} answer to the problem of evil, the objector asks, why bother having a Church?\footnote{28. Hick refers to “say[ing] too little” regarding evil as seeking “the shelter of an inoffensive but unhelpful agnosticism” and “insist[ing] upon maintaining an unrelieved mystery and darkness concerning God’s permission of evil.” Hick, \textit{Evils}, vii, 7-8. “[Religion] is expected to say something about [evil’s]}

This criticism, however, suffers from three fatal flaws.
First, it is inconsistent with the Church’s emphatic teaching that ends do not justify means. If the goal of the original sin doctrine is to provide an answer that helps people who are suffering, this is certainly admirable, but it cannot justify the immorality of preaching anything other than the truth in the name of God. Original sin, as currently taught, is not the truth, and it actively causes suffering above and beyond the suffering it is putatively intended to explain. The desire to provide answers, however well-intended and pressing it may be, cannot morally or ethically justify the continuation of such a teaching.

The second response to the objection is that it is based on a false premise: It assumes that any of the Church’s current answers to the problem of evil actually serves as an effective response to the problem. This assumption is erroneous because original sin does not help members of the faith community understand any of the evils that they encounter. No aspect of the original sin doctrine explains natural or existential evil, other than the punitive rationale that, as discussed above, is neither intellectually coherent nor likely to ameliorate suffering. Even the doctrine’s explanation of moral evil — the area on which the Church has focused for millennia — contributes to believers’ “understanding” only by contradicting other doctrines and raising new, equally unanswerable paradoxes. In short, nothing in the doctrine of original sin

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29. See above chapter 3, note 63. Augustine argued that any untruth knowingly spoken regarding God is a sin, even if the speaker’s intentions are good. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XVIII, XXII.
answers more questions than it raises. Thus, abandoning the partial answers that the doctrine provides would increase theological clarity, not decrease it. *The Hope of Salvation* provides an example, for abandoning the partial answer of limbo allowed the ITC to take a fresh look at the important underlying question of unbaptized infants, unlike earlier attempts explain limbo by debating the merits and detriments of various “lesser hells.” Abandoning original sin would similarly permit the Church to bring its considerable intellectual power to bear on the problem of evil without the constraints imposed by requiring theologians to pay obeisance to the outdated, unsalvageable doctrine.

Finally, underlying the objection to replacing original sin is the notion that the Church cannot simply be silent on such an important matter. While I acknowledge that such theological silence would be neither practical nor wise, abandoning partial answers does not mean that the Church must cease responding altogether to the faith community on matters of suffering. On the contrary, as discussed at the end of this chapter, the doctrine of prayerful hope contains a powerful response that the Church is already employing in the context of unbaptized infants who die, and this response could be employed effectively and realistically in response to all suffering. And even if replacing original sin with prayerful hope might cause people who seek more definitive answers (albeit speculative, wrong answers) to leave the Church, this effect would be offset by retaining those believers who would otherwise be put off by obsolete teachings.
Returning to prayerful hope, the third aspect of the doctrine is the abandonment of traditional but erroneous teachings. In the context of the problem of evil, this means disposing of original sin. Having already explained at length why original sin should be abandoned in its own right, I note here only that prayerful hope does not raise the same problems as the current teaching. Original sin conflicts with numerous important dogmatic principles, but prayerful hope is based on the fundamental Christian truths of a loving, omnipotent God who desires universal salvation. As such, prayerful hope does not conflict with any significant Church teachings (except, of course, original sin). In addition, original sin relies on a fundamentalist interpretation of Genesis 3, but prayerful hope does not require the application of discredited literalism to scripture; it is entirely consistent with the most recent developments in biblical hermeneutics.\(^\text{30}\)

Finally, original sin is the heir to the sexist traditions of Eve-blaming and condemning human sexuality, but prayerful hope represents a radical break from those traditions, completely disentangling gender and sex from the larger question of suffering. In total, therefore, prayerful hope shares none of the major flaws that infect the doctrine of original sin.

There are nonetheless two theological criticisms that might be leveled against this aspect of prayerful hope. First, there is some tension between prayerful hope’s

\(^{30}\) In discussions of this issue, laypeople often argue that original sin has a basis in Genesis 3, while there is no similarly clear scriptural authority for the use of prayerful hope as a response to the problem of evil. This objection, however, is entirely circular: The only reason that original sin might appear to have a basis in scripture is because of the traditional, pseudo-literalist, discredited interpretation of Genesis 3. In contrast, as *The Hope for Salvation* illustrates, there is substantial scriptural support for the proposition that prayerful hope is an appropriate response to suffering.
emphasis on God’s desire for universal salvation and the Church’s historical emphasis
on the absolute necessity of baptism. *The Hope of Salvation* recognizes as much in its
final paragraph, which reminds readers that “[n]one of the above considerations should
be taken as qualifying the necessity of Baptism.”31 But this tension only arises if the
purpose of baptism is to cleanse original sin. If, in contrast, baptism were viewed
primarily as the means of inducting an infant into the faith community,32 there would no
longer be any inconsistency between baptism and prayerful hope’s focus on universal
salvation. This is the ITC’s approach — emphasizing the communal aspect of baptism
over its sin-remitting aspect.33 Abandoning original sin, as I purpose, would simply
take this emphasis to its logical conclusion, i.e., teaching that baptism is *solely* a
community-induction sacrament that has nothing to do with any inherited sin. As such,
there would be no conflict between teaching that baptism is required for entrance into
the “people of God” and providing prayerful hope as a response to the problem of evil.

The second potential criticism of abandoning original sin is a more global
concern: How can the Church maintain its magisterial credibility going forward if it is


Dimension, 1970). “[B]aptism is initiation into a community affording an environment for intelligent and
reasonable growth and intensification of a graced relationship already active.” Duffy, 620. “I can see
[baptism] as an invitation to live a life beyond the natural life.” O’Malley, 119.

willing to abandon a teaching as ancient and central to its traditions as original sin?\footnote{In 1995, then-Cardinal Ratzinger argued that the Church must be careful in revising its less important doctrines so that believers do not fear that the primary doctrines — such as the crucifixion and resurrection — will one day be reinterpreted as merely symbolic. Ratzinger, \textit{In the Beginning}, 6-7.}

My response, without downplaying the importance that history and tradition play in the Church’s doctrinal decisions, is that the Church is demonstrably willing and able to alter its doctrines in light of new knowledge when necessary. Indeed, it has already done so in areas closely related to original sin, including the non-literal understanding of the biblical creation narratives, and in other high-profile matters, such as accepting heliocentrism and rejecting anti-Semitism. \textit{The Hope for Salvation} is a prime example: It abandons the teaching of limbo, which, like original sin, had ancient, Augustinian roots. The ITC accomplished this by reexamining the bases for limbo and finding that they lacked support in contemporary theology and the faith community, just as does original sin. There has been no significant outcry from theologians or the faithful in response.\footnote{Research discloses no published academic objections to \textit{The Hope of Salvation}, and only limited critical responses from the public, e.g., Harold Bloom, “Paradise Found, Limbo Lost,” \textit{New York Times}, Jan. 1, 2006, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/opinion/01bloom.html}.} In other words, no serious argument has been made that the Church compromised its teaching authority by abandoning limbo, and there is no inherent reason that abandoning original sin would be received differently. Even if such objections were raised, it is well within the capabilities of the Church’s theologians to explain how the philosophical, hermeneutical, and scientific developments of the last three hundred years have demonstrated deficiencies in the doctrine of original sin, thereby necessitating its “reinterpretation.” If I can build such a case above, surely the
cumulative power of the Vatican can do much more to explain to the faithful the need for this theological development. The current state of human knowledge makes it possible for the Church, without jeopardizing its authority, to justify finding that its presumption in favor of adherence to tradition has been overcome in the context of original sin.

Finally, the fourth aspect of reforming the Church’s response to the problem of evil is teaching the affirmative aspects of prayerful hope. This means encouraging believers to pray to God for immediate and ultimate salvific deliverance from suffering, and to maintain hope that these prayers will be answered. While a shallow understanding of this notion might render it little more than a theological platitude, it need not be so. The role model for prayer in the face of suffering should be Job, whose challenge to God’srightness and stubborn insistence on justice was the antithesis of a platitude. Job engaged in a verbal confrontation with God that skated right up to the limit of human license to question the divine. In this vein, a believer practicing prayerful hope need not merely ask God to take away pain or offer a general appeal to God’s love. Rather, the believer should be encouraged to actively demand that God either cause the suffering to cease or at least explain, on a personal level, why the suffering is happening. The Church should help those who suffer find a way to express

36. “The goal is to arrive at a theologically grounded sense of hope in the face of suffering . . . and doing this without indulging in either fantasy or idealism.” Crowley, 10-11.
themselves to God as forcefully and eloquently as possible, and help them pray that God will answer in word or deed.  

If implemented in this manner, prayerful hope would avoid perpetuating the harm-inflicting aspects of original sin. Specifically, the new doctrine would not respond to suffering by unjustly blaming the sufferer or by asserting that his suffering proves his badness. By refusing to impose such blame, prayerful hope would eliminate the silencing effect of original sin, which impedes healing, and it would instead advance the healing process by giving free reign to the sufferer’s expressions of anguish, even as they relate to God.

Prayerful hope also avoids doing further damage to the credibility of the Church, because the doctrine does not cast doubt on the validity or authority of the magisterium. Using Tilley’s categories of speech acts, the doctrine of original sin is “assertive” speech, in which the speaker purports to state an actuality. Assertive speech that seems false to the listener (as original sin does to many) reduces the speaker’s credibility vis-à-vis the speaker’s other assertions. Prayerful hope, on the other hand, is an “expressive” speech act, which states what the speaker claims to think or feel.


38. “[P]rayer becomes an act of subversion, and even of liberation. It is an active, as opposed to merely reactive, form of relation to God . . . .” Crowley, 72.

39. Tilley, 40.

40. Ibid., 45.
Because there is no doubt that the Church genuinely does hope for the cessation of suffering and ultimate salvation of those who suffer, there is no problem with the veracity of the expressive teaching. In other words, the current doctrine is equivalent to the Church’s saying, “It is a fact that original sin causes suffering,” while prayerful hope is equivalent to the Church’s saying, “We pray and hope that God will explain your suffering, end it immediately, and grant you redemptive salvation afterwards.” The latter is true, so it provides no reason for the faith community to be skeptical of anything else the Church avows.

In sum, prayerful hope is the most honest, coherent, and theologically sound response that the Church can give to the problem of evil subject in light of current knowledge. While there are several potential counterarguments to adopting prayerful hope as the Church’s sole response to the problem of evil, none of these objections is sufficient to outweigh the benefits that would accrue from such adoption. Indeed, the ITC has already taken the first, most difficult step towards making this transition a reality. It is now the duty of theologians to support that progress and to build on it, in the name of developing a more genuine and comforting response to the suffering that pervades the lives of the faithful.
CONCLUSION

I am under no illusion that the type of change proposed above will be effected overnight. Nonetheless, I offer in closing two brief thoughts regarding why it is realistic to believe that prayerful hope might someday supplant original sin.

First, the transition need not be cataclysmic. It could be gradual, extending over decades or generations. The first, tentative step down this path has already been taken, in the form of *The Hope of Salvation*’s emphatic endorsement of God’s universal salvific desire over the putative sinfulness of humanity. To lay a greater foundation for the new teaching, the Church should now begin to deemphasize the literal understanding of Genesis 3.¹ For example, the Church should ask pastoral priests and religious educators to avoid implying that Adam and Eve were historical persons, in accord with the symbolic understanding it already promotes regarding Genesis 1-2. At the same time, the Church should quietly charge its theologians with reexamining the theological bases for original sin, a process similar to that which the ITC undertook regarding limbo. The goal of this reexamination would be to build on *The Hope of Salvation*, using it and other contemporary developments to demonstrate that the traditional teaching of original sin rests on the same shaky ground that limbo did. Both the deemphasizing of biblical literalism and the reexamination of original sin’s foundations could begin now, but they would require many years to be carried out.

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¹ Even traditionalists have argued that reinterpreting Genesis 3 would be a useful starting point for a broader overhaul of the original sin doctrine. Vanneste, 28.
within the hierarchy, and even longer to alter the wider clergy’s and laity’s perceptions of the scriptural and theological bases for original sin.

After allowing a suitable time for theologians to review and reflect on the reexamination process, the Church could institute a high-level review — led, ideally, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — of alternative responses to the problem of evil. If the appropriate foundation were laid in advance, the Congregation hopefully would conclude that the best alternative would be to expand prayerful hope to encompass all evil, not only the death of unbaptized infants. Such an endorsement from the top of the Church hierarchy would likely persuade a sufficient number of important parties (e.g., bishops and theologians) that prayerful hope represents an appropriate “update” to the Church’s response to the problem of evil. Once this view reaches a critical mass of acceptance, the Church could deemphasize original sin in earnest, placing substantially more weight on prayerful hope and less on the traditional teaching. If carried out over a long enough period, this process would render original sin a *de facto* historical relic, similar to the medieval debates regarding angels on pinheads. The doctrine would simply fade from active Catholic theology, and the Church might not even need to take the dramatic step of officially overturning it. This entire process, which might last between fifty and one hundred years, would provide ample opportunity to gently guide the faith community and the priesthood away from the doctrine of original sin that they were brought up to know.
The second reason that the transition to prayerful hope need not be traumatic is that, as the above description demonstrates, I envision it as a “top-down” change, involving a long-term commitment from a series of popes and cardinals. I believe that the Church inevitably will be led by people who are not only uncomfortable with the obsolescence of original sin (as some current leaders already are), but who also feel that they cannot perpetuate it in good conscience. At some point, these leaders will seek to change the Church’s doctrine. This change, however, will not inhibit the Church’s continuing practical struggle — through charity, good works, and persuasion — against the moral and social evils of the world. And, as theologians, the leaders will not be content simply to invoke prayerful hope as a response to the problem of evil; they will continue searching for a true “answer” to the problem.\(^2\) The continuation of the real-world fight and the theological search are key aspects of rendering prayerful hope palatable to the faith community: They demonstrate that the Church takes human suffering seriously and, like Job, seeks to learn from God why evil occurs.\(^3\) In short, the Church will continue trying to battle and to explain evil even after adopting prayerful hope as its primary response thereto.

Although prayerful hope represents a substantial theological advance over the doctrine of original sin, to abandon the aspiration to greater understanding would do a

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\(^2\) There are a variety of ways in which such efforts might proceed, including an examination of whether the Church has, over time, drifted into a problematic understanding of God’s omnipotence.

\(^3\) Tilley imprecisely refers to the Book of Job as “a biblical directive which warns . . . not to seek ultimate answers.” Tilley, 86. Job does not warn against seeking ultimate answers; it warns against falsely claiming to have found such answers. Burrell, 42, 115-16.
disservice to the faith community and to the many theologians who have attempted throughout history to address the issue of human suffering. The adoption of prayerful hope cannot be the Church’s final word on the topic. To cease searching for an answer to the problem of evil would be to surrender to the suffering that the Church is charged with fighting.
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