

meaning and significance of these sources for the critical questions of our time. What these theologians sought was a spiritual and intellectual communion with Christianity in its most vital moments as transmitted to us in its classic texts, a communion which would nourish, invigorate, and rejuvenate twentieth-century Catholicism.

The *ressourcement* movement bore great fruit in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and has deeply influenced the work of Pope John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger, formerly Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, now Pope Benedict XVI.

The present series is rooted in this twentieth-century renewal of theology, above all as the renewal is carried in the spirit of de Lubac and von Balthasar. In keeping with that spirit, the series understands *ressourcement* as revitalization: a return to the sources, for the purpose of developing a theology that will truly meet the challenges of our time. Some of the features of the series, then, will be:

- a return to classical (patristic-mediaeval) sources;
- a renewed interpretation of St. Thomas;
- a dialogue with the major movements and thinkers of the twentieth century, with particular attention to problems associated with the Enlightenment, modernity, liberalism.

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The editor of the *Ressourcement* series, David L. Schumler, is Gagnon Professor of Fundamental Theology at the John Paul II Institute in Washington, D.C., and editor of the North American edition of *Communio: International Catholic Review*, a federation of journals in thirteen countries founded in Europe in 1972 by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, and others.

'In the Beginning . . .'

*A Catholic Understanding of the Story
of Creation and the Fall*

Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Ratzinger

Translated by

Boniface Ramsey, O.P.

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more clearly discern God's response: Yes, that is the man who is loved by God to the very dust, who is so loved by God that he pursues him to the uttermost toils of death. And even in our own greatest humiliation we are still called by God to be the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and so to share in God's eternal love. The question about what the human being is finds its response in the following of Jesus Christ. Following in his steps from day to day in patient love and suffering we can learn with him what it means to be a human being and to become a human being.

Thus during this Lent we desire to look upon him whom Pilate and whom the church itself places before us. *He is the man.* Let us beseech him to teach us what it really means to become and to be a human being. Amen.

Sin and Salvation

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves

together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and he said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." . . . And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." . . . Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 3:1-12, 17-19, 23-24

On the Subject of Sin¹

After the end of the bishops' synod that was devoted to the subject of the family, we were discussing in a small group possible themes for the next synod, and Jesus' words at the beginning of Mark's Gospel came to mind. These words summarize Jesus' whole message: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). One of the bishops reflected on these words and said that he had the impression that we had long ago actually halved Jesus' message as it is thus summarized. We speak a great deal — and like to speak — about evangelization and the good news in such a way as to make Christianity attractive to people. But hardly anyone, according to this bishop, dares nowadays to proclaim the prophetic message: Repent! Hardly anyone dares to make to our age this elementary evangelical appeal, with which the Lord wants to induce us to acknowledge our sinfulness, to do penance, and to become other than what we are. Our confrere added that Christian preaching today sounded to him like the recording of a symphony that was missing the initial bars of music, so that the whole symphony was incomplete and its development incomprehen-

1. For stimulating thoughts that contributed to this homily I am grateful to J. Pieper, *Über den Begriff der Sünde* (Munich, 1977).

able. With this he touched a weak point of our present-day spiritual situation.

Sin has become almost everywhere today one of those subjects that are not spoken about. Religious education of whatever kind does its best to evade it. Theater and films use the word ironically or in order to entertain. Sociology and psychology attempt to unmask it as an illusion or a complex. Even the law is trying to get by more and more without the concept of guilt. It prefers to make use of sociological language, which turns the concept of good and evil into statistics and in its place distinguishes between normative and nonnormative behavior. Implicit here is the possibility that the statistical proportions will themselves change; what is presently nonnormative could one day become the rule; indeed, perhaps one should even strive to make the nonnormative normal. In such an atmosphere of quantification, the whole idea of the moral has accordingly been generally abandoned. This is a logical development if there is no standard for human beings to use as a model — something not discovered by us but coming from the inner goodness of creation.

With this we have arrived at the real heart of the matter. People today know of no standard; to be sure, they do not want to know of any because they see standards as threats to their freedom. Here one is made to think of some words of the French Jew Simone Weil, who said that “we

experience good only by doing it. . . . When we do evil we do not know it, because evil flies from the light.”² People recognize the good only when they themselves do it. They recognize the evil only when they do not do it.

Thus sin has become a suppressed subject, but everywhere we can see that, although it is suppressed, it has nonetheless remained real. What is remarkable to me is the aggressiveness, always on the verge of pouncing, which we experience openly in our society — the lurking readiness to demean the other person, to hold others guilty whenever misfortune occurs to them, to accuse society, and to want to change the world by violence. It seems to me that all of this can be understood only as an expression of the suppressed reality of guilt, which people do not want to admit. But since it is still there, they have to attack it and destroy it. As long as the situation remains thus — that is, as long as people suppress the truth but do not succeed in doing away with it, and as long as they are suffering from this suppressed truth — it will be one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit to “convince the world of sin” (John 16:8). It is not a question here of making people’s lives unpleasant and of fettering them with restrictions and negations but

2. *Gravity and Grace*, trans. E. Craufurd (London, 1952), 64; Pieper, *Begriff*, 69. Pieper calls attention to some words of Goethe in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 2.8, where he says that we can “not see a mistake until we are free of it.”

rather simply of leading them to the truth and thus healing them. Human beings can be healthy only when they are true and when they stop suppressing and destroying the truth. The third chapter of the Book of Genesis, on which this meditation is based, is of a piece with this task of the Holy Spirit, which he pursues throughout history. He convinces the world and us of sin — not to humiliate us but to make us true and healthy, to “save” us.

Limitations and Freedom of the Human Being

This text proclaims its truth, which surpasses our understanding, by way of two great images in particular — that of the garden, to which the image of the tree belongs, and that of the serpent. The garden is an image of the world, which to humankind is not a wilderness, a danger, or a threat, but a home, which shelters, nourishes, and sustains. It is an expression for a world that bears the imprint of the Spirit, for a world that came into existence in accordance with the will of the Creator. Thus two movements are interacting here. One is that of human beings who do not exploit the world and do not want to detach it from the Creator's governance and make it their own property; rather they recognize it as God's gift and build it up in keeping

with what it was created for. Conversely, we see that the world, which was created to be at one with its Lord, is not a threat but a gift and a sign of the saving and unifying goodness of God.

The second movement involves the image of the serpent, which is taken from the Eastern fertility cults. These fertility religions were severe temptations for Israel for centuries, tempting it to abandon the covenant and to enter into the religious milieu of the time. Through the fertility cults the serpent speaks to the human being: Do not cling to this distant God, who has nothing to offer you. Do not cling to this covenant, which is so alien to you and which imposes so many restrictions on you. Plunge into the current of life, into its delirium and its ecstasy, and thus you will be able to partake of the reality of life and of its immortality.³

At the moment when the paradise narrative took its final literary form there was a great danger that Israel would succumb to the many seductive elements of these religions

3. On the religious-historical background of the serpent, cf. esp. J. Scharbert, *Genesis I-II* (Würzburg, 1983), 55, and C. Westermann, *Genesis 1* (Neukirchen, 1974), 323-28 (which is exhaustive if not in every respect convincing). G. Von Rad (*Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. J. H. Marks, 3rd rev. ed. [Philadelphia, 1972]) does not go much further in his interpretation of the meaning of the serpent, but at 89 he observes very well that the kernel of the temptation was “the possibility of an extension of human existence beyond the limits set for it by God at creation.”

and that the God of the promise and of creation, who seemed so far off, would disappear and be forgotten. Against its historical background, as we know, for example, from events in the life of the prophet Elijah, we can understand this text much better. "The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). In that religious setting the serpent was a symbol of that wisdom which rules the world and of the fertility through which human beings plunge into the divine current of life and for a few moments experience themselves fused with its divine power. Thus the serpent also serves as a symbol of the attraction that these religions exerted over Israel in contrast to the mystery of the God of the covenant.

It is with Israel's temptation in mind that Holy Scripture portrays Adam's temptation and, in general, the nature of temptation and sin in every age. Temptation does not begin with the denial of God and with a fall into outright atheism. The serpent does not deny God; it starts out rather with an apparently completely reasonable request for information, which in reality, however, contains an insinuation that provokes the human being and that lures him or her from trust to mistrust: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). The first thing is not the denial of God but rather doubt about his covenant, about the community of faith, prayer, the commandments

— all of which are the context for living God's covenant. There is indeed a great deal of enlightenment when one doubts the covenant, experiences mistrust, demands freedom, and renounces obedience to the covenant as a strait-jacket that prevents one from enjoying the real promises of life. It is so easy to convince people that this covenant is not a gift but rather an expression of envy of humankind and that it is robbing human beings of their freedom and of the most precious things of life. With this doubt people are well on their way to building their own worlds. In other words, it is then that they make the decision not to accept the limitations of their existence; it is then that they decide not to be bound by the limitations imposed by good and evil, or by morality in general, but quite simply to free themselves by ignoring them.⁴

This doubt about the covenant and the accompanying invitation to human beings to free themselves from their limitations has appeared in various forms throughout history and also shapes the present-day scene.⁵ I mention here only two variations — the aesthetic and the technical. Let us treat the aesthetic variation first. It begins with the question: What may art do? The answer seems perfectly clear:

4. On this interpretation, cf. esp. von Rad, 87-90. There are related comments in J. Auer, *Die Welt — Gottes Schöpfung* (Regensburg, 1975), 527-28.

5. The following considerations are based on the careful reflections on the concept of sin developed in Pieper, *Begriff*, 27-47.

It may do anything that it “artistically” can. It needs only one rule — itself, artistic ability. And only one error can be made with respect to it — artistic error, artistic incompetence. From this it follows that there are no such things as good and bad art works but only well-written or poorly written books, only well-produced or poorly produced films, and so on. The good and the moral no longer count, it seems, but only what one can do. Art is a matter of competence, so it is said; anything else is a violation. That is enlightening! But it means, if one is to be consistent, that there is an area where human beings can ignore their limitations: when they create art, then they may do what they can do; then they have no limitations. And that means in turn that the measure of human beings is what they can do and not what they are, not what is good or bad. What they can do they may do.

The significance of this is far more evident today with respect to the second variation, the technical. But it is only another version of the same way of thinking and of the same reality, because the Greek word *technē* stands for the English word “art,” and the same idea of “being able” is implied here. Hence the same question pertains: What may technology do? For a long time the answer was perfectly clear: It may do what it can do. The only error that it knows is that of incompetence. Robert Oppenheimer relates that, when the atomic bomb became a possibility, nuclear physicists were fascinated

by “the technically sweet.” The technically possible, the desire to do and the actual doing of what it was possible to do, was like a magnet to which they were involuntarily attracted. Rudolf Höss, the last commandant of Auschwitz, declared in his diary that the concentration camp was a remarkable technical achievement. If one took into account the pertinent transportation schedules, the capacity of the crematories, and their burning power, seeing how all of these worked together so smoothly, this was clearly a fascinating and well-coordinated program, and it justified itself.⁶ One could continue at length with similar examples. All the productions of horrible things, whose multiplication we look on nowadays with incomprehension and ultimately with helplessness, have their common basis here. But in the consequences of this principle we should finally recognize today that it is a trick of Satan, who wants to destroy human beings and the world. We should see that human beings can never retreat into the realm of what they are capable of. In everything that they do, they constitute themselves. Therefore they themselves, and creation with its good and evil, are always present as their standard, and when they reject this standard they deceive themselves. They do not free themselves, but place themselves in opposition to the truth. And that means that they are destroying themselves and the world.

6. For both these examples cf. Pieper, *Begriff*, 38, 41.

This, then, is the first and most important thing that appears in the story of Adam, and it has to do with the nature of human guilt and thus with our entire existence. The order of the covenant — the nearness of the God of the covenant, the limitations imposed by good and evil, the inner standard of the human person, creatureliness: all of this is placed in doubt. Here we can at once say that at the very heart of sin lies human beings' denial of their creatureliness, inasmuch as they refuse to accept the standard and the limitations that are implicit in it. They do not want to be creatures, do not want to be subject to a standard, do not want to be dependent. They consider their dependence on God's creative love to be an imposition from without. But that is what slavery is and from slavery one must free oneself. Thus human beings themselves want to be God. When they try this, everything is thrown topsy-turvy. The relationship of human beings to themselves is altered, as well as their relationships to others. The other is a hindrance, a rival, a threat to the person who wants to be God. The relationship with the other becomes one of mutual recrimination and struggle, as is masterfully shown in Genesis 3:8-13, which presents God's conversation with Adam and Eve. Finally, the relationship to the world is altered in such a way as to become one of destruction and exploitation. Human beings who consider dependence on the highest love as slavery and who try to deny the truth about themselves,

which is their creatureliness, do not free themselves; they destroy truth and love. They do not make themselves gods, which in fact they cannot do, but rather caricatures, pseudo-gods, slaves of their own abilities, which then drag them down.

So it is clear now that sin is, in its essence, a renunciation of the truth. Now we can also understand the mysterious meaning of the words: "When you eat of it [that is, when you deny your limitations, when you deny your finitude], then you will die" (cf. Genesis 3:3). This means that human beings who deny the limitations imposed on them by good and evil, which are the inner standard of creation, deny the truth. They are living in untruth and in unreality. Their lives are mere appearance; they stand under the sway of death. We who are surrounded by a world of untruths, of unlife, know how strong this sway of death is, which even negates life itself and makes it a kind of death.

Original Sin

In the Genesis story that we are considering, still a further characteristic of sin is described. Sin is not spoken of in general as an abstract possibility but as a deed, as the sin of a particular person, Adam, who stands at the origin of humankind and with whom the history of sin begins. The

account tells us that sin begets sin, and that therefore all the sins of history are interlinked. Theology refers to this state of affairs by the certainly misleading and imprecise term "original sin." What does this mean? Nothing seems to us today to be stranger or, indeed, more absurd than to insist upon original sin, since, according to our way of thinking, guilt can only be something very personal, and since God does not run a concentration camp, in which one's relatives are imprisoned, because he is a liberating God of love, who calls each one by name. What does original sin mean, then, when we interpret it correctly?

Finding an answer to this requires nothing less than trying to understand the human person better. It must once again be stressed that no human being is closed in upon himself or herself and that no one can live of or for himself or herself alone. We receive our life not only at the moment of birth but every day from without — from others who are not ourselves but who nonetheless somehow pertain to us. Human beings have their selves not only in themselves but also outside of themselves: they live in those whom they love and in those who love them and to whom they are "present." Human beings are relational, and they possess their lives — themselves — only by way of relationship. I alone am not myself, but only in and with you am I myself. To be truly a human being means to be related in love, to be *of* and *for*. But sin means the damaging or the destruction

of relationality. Sin is a rejection of relationality because it wants to make the human being a god. Sin is loss of relationship, disturbance of relationship, and therefore it is not restricted to the individual. When I destroy a relationship, then this event — sin — touches the other person involved in the relationship. Consequently sin is always an offense that touches others, that alters the world and damages it. To the extent that this is true, when the network of human relationships is damaged from the very beginning, then every human being enters into a world that is marked by relational damage. At the very moment that a person begins human existence, which is a good, he or she is confronted by a sin-damaged world. Each of us enters into a situation in which relationality has been hurt. Consequently each person is, from the very start, damaged in relationships and does not engage in them as he or she ought. Sin pursues the human being, and he or she capitulates to it.

But from this it is also clear that human beings alone cannot save themselves. Their innate error is precisely that they want to do this by themselves. We can only be saved — that is, be free and true — when we stop wanting to be God and when we renounce the madness of autonomy and self-sufficiency. We can only be saved — that is, become ourselves — when we engage in the proper relationship. But our interpersonal relationships occur in the context of our

utter creatureliness, and it is there that the damage lies. Since the relationship with creation has been damaged, only the Creator himself can be our savior. We can be saved only when he from whom we have cut ourselves off takes the initiative with us and stretches out his hand to us. Only being loved is being saved, and only God's love can purify damaged human love and radically reestablish the network of relationships that have suffered from alienation.

The Response of the New Testament

Thus the Old Testament account of the beginnings of humankind points, questioningly and hopefully, beyond itself to the One in whom God endured our refusal to accept our limitations and who entered into those limitations in order to restore us to ourselves. The New Testament response to the account of the Fall is most briefly and most urgently summarized in the pre-Pauline hymn that Paul incorporated into the second chapter of his Letter to the Philippians. The church has therefore correctly placed this text at the very center of the Easter Triduum, the holiest time of the church year. "Have this in mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a

servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:5-11; cf. Isaiah 45:23).

We cannot consider this extraordinarily rich and profound text in detail. We want to limit ourselves here to its connection with the story of the Fall, even though it seems to have a somewhat different version in mind than the one that is related in Genesis 3 (cf., e.g., Job 15:7-8).⁷ Jesus Christ goes Adam's route, but in reverse. In contrast to Adam he is really "like God." But this being like God, this similarity to God, is being a Son, and hence it is totally relational. "I do nothing on my own authority" (John 8:28). Therefore the One who is truly like God does not hold graspingly to his autonomy, to the limitlessness of his ability and his willing. He does the contrary: he becomes completely dependent, he becomes a slave. Because he does not go the route of power but that of love, he can descend into the

7. On the variations of the tradition of the Fall and on their different biblical forms as well as their non-Israelite background there is some information in A. Weiser, *Das Buch Hiob* (Göttingen, 1964), 113-14.

depths of Adam's lie, into the depths of death, and there raise up truth and life.

Thus Christ is the new Adam, with whom humankind begins anew. The Son, who is by nature relationship and relatedness, reestablishes relationships. His arms, spread out on the cross, are an open invitation to relationship, which is continually offered to us. The cross, the place of his obedience, is the true tree of life. Christ is the antitype of the serpent, as is indicated in John 3:14. From this tree there comes not the word of temptation but that of redeeming love, the word of obedience, which an obedient God himself used, thus offering us his obedience as a context for freedom. The cross is the tree of life, now become approachable. By his passion Christ, as it were, removed the fiery sword, passed through the fire, and erected the cross as the true pole of the earth, by which it is itself once more set aright. Therefore the Eucharist, as the presence of the cross, is the abiding tree of life, which is ever in our midst and ever invites us to take the fruit of true life. This means that the Eucharist can never be merely a kind of community builder. To receive it, to eat of the tree of life, thus means to receive the crucified Lord and consequently to accept the parameters of his life, his obedience, his "yes," the standard of our creatureliness. It means to accept the love of God, which is our truth — that dependence on God which is no more an imposition from without than is the Son's sonship. It is

precisely this dependence that is freedom, because it is truth and love.

May this Lent help us to free ourselves from our refusals and our doubt concerning God's covenant, from our rejection of our limitations and from the lie of our autonomy. May it direct us to the tree of life, which is our standard and our hope. May we be touched by the words of Jesus in their entirety: "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).