

When I was in grade school we learned that original sin was a stain on our soul and that baptism wiped away original sin. We had very concrete images about these matters, using dirty milk bottles and so forth. Our teacher told us no one knew exactly where the soul was, but it was all right for us to have our own idea about its location. I decided, for reasons I still cannot fully explain, that my soul was located in my right shoulder. And I believed that the waters of baptism had wiped it clean.

The Catholic teaching about original sin developed from a very practical question pertaining to baptism. In the early church, most of those being baptized were adults. They learned that baptism cleanses from sin. However as time went on the ratio of babies being baptized increased. This raised the question, "If baptism cleanses from sin, what sin did these babies commit?" Well, they couldn't commit sin, but since they were being cleansed from it, the only logical answer was that they were somehow born in sin. Theologians turned to Paul's letter to the Romans and found the passage we hear as today's second reading: "Just as sin came into the world through one man, all have sinned." They thought Paul meant Adam's sin affected everyone. Ever since, Catholics have followed a doctrine of original sin, although Paul never did use the expression.

I believe the idea is good, but I never liked the term "original sin." For one thing, when people equate original sin with Adam's sin, they imagine that Adam's sin is passed on like a congenital disease. Paul is talking about the human condition, not a sin you pass on from parent to child. Other people conclude that the sin it refers to is sex. But that's not true. The Catholic Church regards sex within marriage as a beautiful and necessary expression of human love. Original sin is not sin in the sense of something you do or decide. It's more a condition, a circumstance of life before baptism and before participation in the body of Christ. Such a condition makes one more likely to sin, like living in St. Louis would make you more susceptible to the abuse of rooting for a National League baseball team. In fact, this is why we have scrutiny rites for our catechumens during lent; they help purify the catechumens from their attachment to that condition and prepare them for the grace of Christ. Nowadays when we talk about the effects of baptism we don't stress original sin; we say that baptism brings about life in Christ, but it's the flipside of the same coin. If you're becoming part of Christ you must have been part of something else beforehand, and that something else beforehand has received what I think is a confusing title, "original sin."

Older Catholics sometimes express concern about their unbaptized grandchildren; they're afraid that if the babies die they'll go to limbo or hell. Probably not. We recommend that babies be baptized within the first few weeks of birth, but only if the parents are ready and willing to raise the children in the practice of the faith. If a child should tragically die before baptism, we entrust that child to the mercy of God; God has the ability to redeem a child even without baptism; it says so right in our catechism.

The key point is that whatever may keep a person from full sharing in the life of Christ can be obliterated in the waters of baptism. So for

those who are baptized, you never have to worry about it any more. There's other sin we commit, but once we are Christians, original sin is gone; we can never again be apart from Christ. Sometimes we Christians squabble with each other over some pretty silly matters. We forget that in baptism we are all already one in Christ.