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MODERN THEORIES OF ORIGINAL SIN, AND THE DOGMA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

There has been an enormous amount written during the past two decades on new theories of original sin; but surprisingly little of it can be brought into meaningful contact with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. One reason is that a good deal of it has been the work of hit and run theologians who collide vehemently with the classical notion of original sin, but don't linger at the scene of the accident long enough for a person to determine in what direction they are speeding, or even whether they have got a valid theological licence. They pronounce the classical notion to be mythological in character, and based on a static view of the world that is unacceptable to the modern mind; they knowingly affirm that it has been replaced by new concepts more congenial to a dynamic, evolutionary perspective. And indeed they demonstrate their own dynamism by the unflagging stamina with which they repeat these charges, but they don't usually say much about the new theory that is to replace the one they have annihilated.

Even when you confine attention to the serious literature, you do not find many attempts to construct a full and coherent theory of original sin. There have been many exegetical studies of Genesis 2 and 3 and Romans 5, and many historico-critical essays on the theology of Augustine and the doctrine of Carthage, Orange and Trent. All of these contribute to our understanding of the problem, but most of them touch only obliquely on, or contribute only fragmentarily towards, its solution.

Finally, the relatively few works which have attempted to construct a new theory of original sin are usually preoccupied with the problem of integrating it into an evolutionary perspective. That is to say, they are focused on the meaning of

Adam and the origins of the human race, and therefore, so far as sin is concerned, on *peccatum originale originans*, rather than on original sin as it affects man today—*peccatum originale originatum*. But it is only on the latter point that these theories can be related to the Immaculate Conception. You can make what you like out of Adam, Eve and the apple; your theory will not make contact with Mary's privilege until you draw out its implications in regard to that sinfulness to which other men are subject from birth, but from which Mary was by grace exempt¹

I

In the field thus delimited, I find four distinct theories that call for attention, two of them very briefly, and two at greater length. The first author to be considered briefly is Teilhard de Chardin.² Even though he wrote only very sketchily and tentatively about original sin, his ideas have done more to orient the direction of contemporary theology on this subject than those of any professional theologian

¹ For practical reasons, this paper will confine attention to the theories of Catholic theologians

² Teilhard de Chardin composed two unpublished essays on original sin *Notes sur quelques représentations historiques possibles du péché originel* (an 8-page manuscript, 1924), and *Réflexions sur le péché originel* (a 7-page manuscript, 1947)

He also speaks of the subject in *La vie cosmique*, (1916), *Ecrits du temps de la guerre* (Paris, 1965), p. 61, *Quelques vues générales sur l'essence du christianisme* (unpublished manuscript of 3 pages, 1939), *Comment je vois* (unpublished manuscript of 26 pages, 1948), p. 20, note 32; and *L'étoffe de l'univers* (1953), published in *Oeuvres de Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris, 1955-1965) vii, 405

As is evident from these references, the more important part of Teilhard's writings on original sin have not yet been published. In the remarks that follow, I am relying on the interesting essay of Christopher Mooney, S.J., who has access to the unpublished papers, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (New York, 1964, Image Book ed 1968) pp 142-151)

T.C. Teilhard reacted against the classical concept of original sin as too narrow and too negative.³ It did not provide a broad enough basis for the cosmic dimensions he wanted to attribute to the Redemption, and it did not chime with the optimism of his view of man in evolution. He proposed instead to regard original sin as a mythical representation of the imperfection intrinsic to an evolving world. The doctrine of original sin, he says:

expresses, translates and personifies, in an instantaneous and localized action, the perennial and universal law of deficiency which governs humanity in virtue of its being *in fieri*.⁴

So far as I know, this theory has not been adopted as it stands by any serious theologian.⁵ The reason is obvious. The imperfection natural to beings that have to grow to maturity is not sin in any sense of the word. Nevertheless, the ideas of Teilhard have influenced nearly all the new theories of original sin that have appeared in the past decade, and they are symptomatic of motivations, preoccupations, and predominant drifts even beyond the range of their actual influence.

Let us turn now to the three remaining theories. Classical theology identified original sin with congenital moral disorders such as concupiscence. The new theories all reject this identification; although, it should be pointed out, none of the authors we are about to consider seems to have a very profound

³ It is not so much what he wrote about original sin that has had this influence, as the spirit and logic of his cosmology. In this regard, it is significant that Piet Smulders, after pointing out that the ideas of Teilhard on this subject could be presented very briefly, nevertheless feels compelled to supplement his essay on Teilhard's vision with an appendix on the theory of original sin (*The Design of Teilhard de Chardin*, Newman 1967, appendix III). It is also significant in another way that, instead of presenting or elaborating Teilhard's theory, he offers one of his own, designed to satisfy the exigencies of both Teilhard's cosmology and Christian doctrine. See some further remarks at the end of this paper.

⁴ Cited by Mooney, p. 149, from *Notes sur quelques représentations . . .*, p. 6.

grasp of the Thomistic theory. What they represent as "the classical theory" is usually a compound of popular presentations and low grade manual theology; and the points they object to are often quite adventitious or secondary.

Be that as it may, the new theories see original sin as consisting in something other than a moral defect inherited along with human nature. Schoonenberg situates it in the sinful environment or atmosphere created by the community into which the child is born. Vanneste, followed by Gutwenger, reduces original sin to the incompleteness of the man who is not yet united with Christ. Finally, Trooster proposes that original sin is a kind of rudimentary actual sin that everyone inevitably commits in early infancy.

This last view does not demand lengthy consideration, so we can take it up first. Trooster⁶ says:

"Original sin" in the unbaptized child could be delineated as follows: a radical and fundamental unwillingness to accept God's offer of salvation, due to the universal power of sin into which each human being is born.⁷

The author makes it plain (*ibid.*) that the "unwillingness" which he has in mind is an actual sin, but of an "initial" sort proportionate to the immaturity of the child who is its subject. This is only a reincarnation, modernized and popularized, of the oldest and crudest misconception of original sin, one that was examined and found wanting long ago. Because original sin must be conceived by analogy with actual sin, it is here imagined to be simply actual sin in an attenuated form. This view rests upon the absurdity of supposing that an infant

⁵ On this point, see also Smulders, *loc. cit.*

⁶ Stephanus Trooster, S.J., a former student of Schoonenberg (see p. 3 of his book), is now professor of dogmatic theology at the Jesuit Theological Seminary of Maastricht, Netherlands. His book, *Evolutie in de erfzondeleer* (Bruges, 1965), has appeared in English as *Evolution and the doctrine of original sin* (Newman Press, 1968).

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 123.

is capable in some way of a responsible personal decision. It creates the problem, to which it gives only a specious, mythical answer,⁸ of why every child makes the same wrong decision. And it goes against the tendency of modern child psychology to put off till later, rather than earlier, the time when the child becomes capable of serious sin.

If, however, we disregard these objections, and compare Trooster's theory with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, it might appear at first sight that there is no conflict. If we suppose that an infant is capable of actual sin in an attenuated form, we could hold that Mary was preserved by grace from falling into this sin. I believe, however, that closer examination discloses an incompatibility between these two positions. According to the dogma, Mary was preserved from original sin in the first instant of her conception. But there is no possibility of an *actual* sin in the first instant of conception. A human act is the act of a complete being already in existence; and in any plausible version of Trooster's theory, the first sin could surely not be committed until after birth. Hence, it would be meaningless to say that Mary was preserved from sin *in* her conception.

* * *

5 The remaining two theories require a somewhat lengthier attention. That of Schoonenberg⁹ germinates out of the Johannine

⁸ If the "power of sin" is to be understood on the basis of Trooster's preceding chapters, it is either a mythical notion that explains nothing, but itself clamors for explanation, or it is the result of actual sin, and cannot be given as the reason for the universality of the latter. If it is to be understood along the line of Schoonenberg's "sin situation," as p. 3 perhaps suggests, it labors under all the difficulties of Schoonenberg's theory (see below) plus those peculiar to Trooster.

⁹ Piet Schoonenberg, S.J., was professor of theology at the Jesuit Scholasticate of Maastricht, and subsequently professor of dogmatic theology at the Catechetical Center of Nijmegen. His most famous work, *De Macht der Zonde* (Malmberg, 's-Hertogenbosch, 1962), was published in English translation as *Man and Sin* (U of Notre Dame Press, 1965). This is the chief exposition of his thought, and all references to Schoonenberg's thought, except where otherwise indicated, will be to it.

expression, "Sin of the world."¹⁰ St John, like Sts Paul and James, envisions the world as prostrate in sin under the power of the evil one.¹¹ All three of these sacred writers, as well as many of the prophets before them, seem to think of sin as something deeper and more enveloping than individual human misdeeds. It appears at times to be one great evil resting like a dark cloud upon the whole world and engendering all the particular transgressions of men. Schoonenberg undertakes to analyze this "sin of the world," and concludes with the hypothesis that it is identical with what is traditionally known as original sin.

The sins we commit, he says, create a situation that influences others. The act of a free person is an invitation addressed to the freedom of others, calling them to do in like manner (111 ff.) Moreover, by failing to give them good example, we deprive them of the stimulus and assistance they need to develop a true moral conscience.¹² When not only an individual, but the community as a whole, so lives and thinks as to urge a person to sin, the pressure becomes so great that it is practically impossible for an individual to resist it (113 ff.).

In the extreme case, this impossibility can become absolute. Schoonenberg suggests the example of the child born into a family that lives by theft or prostitution. If we suppose (what can never really occur) that these values are totally absent from the moral climate in which the child matures, then, says

The following works by the same author are also pertinent: *Theologie der Sünde* (Einsiedeln, 1966) (not available to the present author), "Mysterium iniquitatis," *Wort und Wahrheit* 21 (1966) 557-591 (this work I have been able to obtain only in the following digest-translation), *Original sin and man's situation*, in *ThD* 15 (1967) 203-208.

¹⁰ John 1 29: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin (not sins!) of the world" (Cf *Man and sin*, p. 101.)

¹¹ Schoonenberg frequently refers to *I John* 5 19: "The whole world is in the power of the evil one."

¹² P. 115. Schoonenberg does not say much about the influence of the erroneous ideals and standards and philosophy of life of the community, nor of the efforts of others to persuade a man to act against his conscience, but obviously these also belong to the sin situation.

Schoonenberg, it will be absolutely impossible for him to develop an appreciation of them (p 115-117). Schoonenberg stresses the fact that this impossibility is absolute in the strict and proper sense

However, the final and decisive factor in the creation of the sin situation lies in the sinner's failure to mediate grace to others. According to Schoonenberg, grace can be communicated to a man only through the mediation of other men (119); the sinner fails to do this. Now if we suppose a situation in which no grace whatsoever is mediated, this will be equivalent to original sin as traditionally understood. But can we imagine a situation so sinful as to exclude all mediation of grace? Schoonenberg proposes that the Crucifixion of Christ brought about such a situation by excluding the unique Mediator of grace from the world. While it is true that God paradoxically uses the death of Christ to usher in our Redemption, still, of itself, and insofar as it is the act of man, the Crucifixion constitutes the culminating act in the history of sin, excluding all grace from the world so far as this depends on man (107, 120 ff.)

This implies that prior to the Crucifixion mankind was *not* totally deprived of grace. The grace given in primeval times still filtered down through human history, so that not only Mary, but indeed many others may have been free from original sin. Only upon Christ's death¹³ did original sin become strictly universal; but then it becomes so absolutely universal that even if, *per impossible*, Mary had come into the world after the Crucifixion, she could not have been conceived immaculate (189 f.).

To put the matter in another way, the Fall of man, by which he is plunged into original sin, did not occur in the beginning, but came about only gradually through a long history of sin, and was not completed until the Crucifixion (107 f.)

¹³ Schoonenberg says, "death and resurrection" (p 190). But why the latter addition?

This idea, that the Fall was not completed, nor original sin universal, until the Crucifixion, is the most dramatic and famous element of Schoonenberg's theory, but it is not the point to which he adheres most firmly. In a later work, he stresses its hypothetical character, and proposes another way of establishing the universality of original sin without it (and one which includes pre-christian men as well). "If," he says, "one considers original sin to be not only the situation of the infant at birth, but as situating man's whole existence, then it is in fact universal. Because sin has entered into the world, every man will meet it in some form or other."¹⁴

In either hypothesis, original sin is the situation created for us by the sins of the community around us. It is not inherited from our forebears,¹⁵ but encountered among our contemporaries. It resides within us, Schoonenberg is at great pains to say (105, 173, 180); but it enters us from without, subsequent to our birth. It is not a congenitally inherent factor of our existence.

* * *

Schoonenberg's theory has attracted attention all over the world, and has been welcomed as a plausible reinterpretation of the dogma of original sin that also satisfies the demands of modern thought. It is my own conviction, however, that this theory is both incompatible with the teachings of faith, and incoherent in itself.

It seems to contradict the Catholic faith on a number of points, e.g. the universality of original sin, the manner of its propagation and the nature of its inherence. Thus, the Council of Trent, following that of Carthage, teaches that this sin is transmitted by propagation, not imitation.¹⁶ Schoonenberg's

¹⁴ "Mysterium iniquitatis," as cited in *TbD* 15 (1966) 207.

¹⁵ This does not of course mean that the sins of our forebears don't contribute to it. They had obviously had much to do with the creation of that climate of sin that exists today.

¹⁶ Cf. *D-S* 223 and 1513.

theory is a theory of transmission by imitation.¹⁷ He has indeed gone to great lengths to show, by the aid of depth psychology, that the influence of others affects us more intimately than is commonly supposed; and in this he is no doubt right. But in the last analysis, he is still proposing a theory of transmission by imitation, which has been expressly excluded by the *magisterium* as inadequate.

From a purely intellectual point of view, Schoonenberg's theory seems to be essentially incoherent. It is based on two explanations that are radically diverse: the natural moral influence of one man's example and ideas upon another, and the supernatural communication of grace, which transcends the limitations to which moral influence is subject. Schoonenberg pushes the explanation by moral influence as far as he can in order to make original sin humanly and naturally understandable. But in the end, in order to account for the universality and absolute character of original sin, he is obliged to abandon this natural explanation and appeal to the mediation of grace. Two different economies or dynamics are being used here, as will be more apparent below. The effort to link them in the Crucifixion, presented on the one hand as the crowning act of human sin, and on the other as the exclusion of the source of grace, only camouflages the ambiguity. If it was the Crucifixion that made original sin universal and absolute, then the moral influence of men on one another becomes irrelevant. But if a decisive role is not attached to the Crucifixion, the universality and absoluteness of original sin is impossible to explain by appeal to moral influence.¹⁸

In many other ways, I believe, Schoonenberg's theory is inconsistent, mythical, and incompatible with articles of faith. But because of its complexity, the vagueness of its ideas, the shift in meaning of terms from one context to another, and the anthropological, psychological, exegetical and historical er-

¹⁷ His denial on p. 174 notwithstanding.

¹⁸ This is evident in the revised version of Schoonenberg's theory, mentioned above.

addition with which the discourse is overlaid (sometimes not very deeply), it would take a long and tedious exposition to demonstrate this. Even if anyone listened through to the end, the results would hardly warrant the expenditure.¹⁹

There is, however, a more expeditious way of measuring the orthodoxy of Schoonenberg's theory; that is to compare it with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Then, I believe, it quickly becomes apparent that the one is incompatible with the other: not because Schoonenberg denies the Immaculate Conception, but rather because he affirms it as it were too much. For him, many immaculate conceptions would have been possible before the Crucifixion. This contradicts the teaching of *Ineffabilis Deus*, that it was by "a singular grace and privilege of almighty God" that Mary was preserved sinless (DBS 2803). To answer that Mary's grace was unlike all others, because hers proceeds from the Redemption, whereas the others come from primeval grace,²⁰ does not save the case, but makes it worse. It means that among the children of Adam (taking this term *Adam* in whatever interpretation Schoonenberg might want to put on it), there were some who did not need to be redeemed by Christ. Such a position has already been rejected by the instinct of faith centuries ago with such vehemence that we need not dwell on the point. We may, however, add that for Schoonenberg the singularity of Mary's grace would consist in her *inferiority* to all these

¹⁹ Schoonenberg has anticipated many of the objections to which his theory is liable, and has answered them in advance. However, the presuppositions of his answers sometimes appear to conflict with those of the positions being defended.

²⁰ P. 189. If by saying that these others received a grace that did not proceed from the Redemption, Schoonenberg means that their grace did not come from Christ, Schoonenberg is not only contradicting the Church but also himself, for he has said earlier that all grace whatsoever comes from Christ (p. 106). I assume, therefore, that in the present instance, he means that there was a grace that came from Christ, but did not pertain to the order of the Redemption.

other anonymous immaculate conceptees, since her grace had to be redemptive, whereas theirs did not.²¹

There is a second way on which Schoonenberg makes the Immaculate Conception meaningless. He explains original sin as the situation resulting from the bad example of others and kindred factors. But how can bad example affect anyone at the moment of conception? The child begins to be influenced by the example of others only when he is mature enough to take cognizance of it. I don't know at what age psychologists would say this begins to take place. at a few weeks, or a few months, or a year or two. But it is surely not operative from the moment of birth, let alone the moment of conception. Therefore to say that Mary was preserved from the influence of the sin situation at the instant of her conception is to say nothing.

Schoonenberg has, it is true, an answer for this. It is the privation of grace in the newly born or newly conceived infant that is the inner core of sin (180 f; cf. 118 ff.). On this point his theory coincides with what a degraded sort of scholasticism has been saying for several centuries about original sin, and the same objection that has been raised against it can also be raised against him: namely, that the absence of a supernatural gift is not in itself sufficient justification for the term *sin*. What Schoonenberg adds to this familiar foolishness is the hypothesis that the absence of grace in the new child is due to the failure of the human community to mediate it. But as soon as you reflect on what this might mean concretely, it becomes apparent that this theory is not only open to all the objections that have been raised against the baneful role attributed traditionally to Adam, but also to many more. For in what way are the actions of parents, or of anyone else, able to mediate grace to the unborn child? Schoonenberg himself

²¹ Note that this objection gets all the more strength when Schoonenberg drops the thesis about the decision role of the Crucifixion, and seeks to defend the universality of original sin in his theory on the grounds that "every man will meet sin in one form or another." Cf. "*Mysterium iniquitatis*," as cited in *ThD* 15 (1967) 207.

contends that "Divine grace is always connected with human mediation." For, he says, "on account of our being human and especially on account of the humanity of God's Word there is no granting of God's grace in which the world and one's fellow man do not have a part" (119). But in what sense can the world and man's fellow man have had a part in the grace given to Mary in her conception? In the view of Anselm and Thomas Aquinas, grace had originally been associated with human nature, and could be transmitted along with it; but Schoonenberg has rejected such an economy. All that is left, as his discussion of the "innermost core of the sinful situation" bears out (118 ff) is that the interpersonal actions are duplicated by a hidden, interior grace. But there is no place for such actions to have any bearing on the unborn child.

Finally, if original sin is identified with the situation created by the sins of the community, what would it mean to say that Mary was preserved from it? In fact, she was not so preserved; she was situated in this sinful world like anyone else that has come into it. If you say that grace armed her in advance, so as not to be drawn into personal sin, thereby identifying the Immaculate Conception with impeccability, this is not *preservation from* but *protection against*.

In summary, Schoonenberg eliminates the Immaculate Conception in the sense in which the Church understands it, as a preservation from the sin to which all others are subject from birth. On the other hand, he eliminates the privileged character of her grace by reducing it to one which many others may have shared. To the extent that he explains the sin situation as the product of human influence (and this is his predominant stress), he can make no sense of the Immaculate Conception. But to the extent that he has recourse to the privation of grace, he falls into the difficulties of the more degraded forms of post-Tridentine scholasticism, and has not even the *First Adam* to save him from them!

✓ Schoonenberg's attempt to relate original sin to the sin of the world is dismissed as "concordism"²² by A. Vanneste.²³ For the latter,

The mystery of original sin . . . is nothing but an aspect of the mystery of Christ Himself. For the sin with which we come into this world is our nature's profound need to be saved by Him, is it not? (ETL 1962, p. 903).

The Catholic doctrine of original sin is, it would seem, nothing other than an attempt to define the theological state or status (*état, statut*) of man outside of Christ (NRT, 1965, p. 717).

In its deepest kernel, the dogma of original sin attempts to express that paradoxical Christian truth that the grace of Christ, while wholly gratuitous, is nevertheless absolutely necessary and indispensable for all men without exception (NRT, 1966, p. 600).

Vanneste's idea was adopted by a professor at Innsbruck, G. Gutwenger,²⁴ who drew out its consequences more unflinchingly

²² Cf. *ThD* 15 (1967) 209. Gutwenger similarly warns that only with great caution may one speak of original sin as a sin situation. There is danger of falling into a mythological language (as did St. Paul when he personified sin and death). As Gutwenger puts it in his own philosophically crude language: "Sin and death are abstractions, only sinning and dying men are real" (*Zf&T* 89 [1967] 437).

²³ Alfred Vanneste is dean of the theological faculty of Lovanium University in the Congo. His writings on original sin seem to have begun with a review (in *ETL* 38 [1962] 895-903) of J. Gross' *Entstehungsgeschichte des Erbsündendogmas* (Reinhardt, München/Basel, 1960), entitled, *L'histoire du dogme du péché originel*. This was followed by a series of three articles dealing with the Tridentine decrees on original sin: *La préhistoire du décret du Concile de Trente sur le péché originel*, in *NRT* 86 (1964) 355-368, 490-510; *Le décret du Concile de Trente sur le péché originel*, in *NRT* 87 (1965) 688-726 (on canons 1-3 only); and *Le péché originel et les décrets du Concile de Trente*, in *NRT* 88 (1966) 581-602 (Canon 4 only). Finally, he composed an autonomous theological essay on the subject, *De theologie van de erfzonde*, in *CBG* 12 (1966) 289-312, which has been summarized in English in *ThD* 15 (1967) 209-214. I have had to use the digest for this last article.

²⁴ G. Gutwenger, *Die Erbsünde und das Konzil von Trient*, in *Zf&T* 89 (1967) 443-446.

and expressed its true sense more openly and harshly than did Vanneste himself. In the language of Gutwenger, original sin is nothing but the incompleteness of the man who has not yet been united to Christ.²⁵

The starting point of this theory is man's need of Christ. But, whereas classical theology distinguished two reasons for this need, even in infants who have not committed actual sin, Vanneste and Gutwenger see only one reason. Classical theology distinguishes between sin, and the mediation of supernatural grace.

For Vanneste and Gutwenger, there is simply the fact that man was so designed that he could be fulfilled only by union with Christ. Gutwenger says that we know from revelation that man's ordination to Christ, literally his "being unto Christ" (*Auf-Christus-hin-sein*) is an existential factor belonging to his constitution just as much as his being in the world or his being with others.²⁶ Vanneste says that "the human situation means that men must choose for or against Christ—that is what it means to be a man at all."²⁷ So long as man has not made the choice which unites him to Christ and fulfills the ordination of his nature, he is in that state which tradition calls original sin.

Thus it is clear that these theologians do not recognize in original sin anything other than man's destiny for union with God in Christ, as this resides in one who has not yet adhered to Christ by personal faith. In other words, original sin re-

²⁵ "Vor dieser Entscheidung ist der Mensch noch ein Mangelwesen, weil er noch in der Indifferenz steht und in diesem Sinne noch nicht erlöst ist. Erst In-Christus-sein heisst Erlösung und Errettung. Durch die menschliche Zeugung wird nicht mehr als ein solches Mangelwesen hervorgebracht" (p. 446).

²⁶ "Der Mensch besitzt aber auch ein aus der Offenbarung erkennbares Existential, nämlich das Auf-Christus-hin-sein, das ebenso zu seiner Verfasstheit gehört wie das In-der-Welt-sein und das Mit-anderen-sein" (p. 437).

²⁷ *TbD* 1967, p. 212.

duces to the disparity between nature and the supernatural (however this disparity be interpreted).

But this is in truth to deny original sin in any legitimate sense of the word. And in fact both authors point out that the term *sin* is very improperly used in this case. Thus Gutwenger says that an infant, before he has made his free decision for or against Christ, is in a state of indifference, but an indifference which belongs naturally and necessarily to the human condition. He goes on:

The man who is in this state of indifference lacks something, namely the existential apprehension of Christ. But this lack cannot be held against him, because the decision for Christ intrinsically presupposes a condition of indifference and choice. If God wills that we choose Christ, then He also wills this foregoing state of indifference. It belongs to human nature, and Scripture says nothing to the effect that it derives from the sin of Adam (p. 438).

Similarly, Vanneste declares:

It is meaningless to speak of sin in infants. . . but it also makes little sense to term them good or innocent. As not yet mature human persons, they are really a-religious, living at a pre-conscious, animal level about which theology has nothing to say (TD 1967, p. 212).

But, he adds, since we naturally tend to think of infants as human beings, we call them sinners because they have not yet made that decision for Christ which is demanded of human beings, and without which man is outside of Christ (*ibid.*)

All this means that the term *sin* applies only improperly to infants.²⁸ There is no true sin except actual sin, and the term *original sin* designates nothing other than man's destiny to be united with Christ, so long as this destiny has not been fulfilled. In other words, Vanneste and Gutwenger simply

²⁸ Gutwenger means nothing else when he says that it is used very analogously (p. 438).

reject the *doctrine* of original sin, regardless of what they say about the term

This of course brings them into conflict with the Council of Trent, as they are well aware. It is no accident that both of them have expressed their views in studies on the doctrine of that Council. Neither attempts to reconcile his views with Trent; on the contrary, their strategy is to set aside the authority of the Council. For this, they use different tactics. Vanneste simply tells the history of the conciliar decrees, using his own views about what is authentic Christianity as the criterion whereby to appraise the Council's work and to dismiss whatever he deems unenlightened or misinformed. Gutwenger argues plainly that the concept of original sin taught by the Council could not be defined as a dogma of faith because it is only a theological conclusion.²⁹ Both make a great deal of the fact that the teachings of Trent are largely taken over from the Councils of Orange and Carthage, which in turn were inspired by Augustine, who, they declare, based his conclusions on a mistranslation of Romans 5:12 and on faulty pre-suppositions.³⁰

The Augustinian scholarship of these two men is not only inaccurate, it is flagrantly misrepresentative, as I hope to show in a lengthy study which is now in preparation.³¹ Likewise, their theological method is wrong, because they evade the fact that Trent was not just a forum of theological opinion; it was an authoritative judgment of the *magisterium*. It conferred upon the doctrine of original sin an authority greater than that of Augustine, or even of the Councils of Carthage and Orange.

²⁹ Pp. 440-443. He also describes it as a dogmatic superstructure designed to justify the teachings of Scripture (misunderstood) and the practice of infant baptism (which was merely an ecclesiastical practice); p. 437.

³⁰ Cf. Gutwenger 438 and 443; Vanneste *passim*.

³¹ It is tentatively entitled, *Sin and Grace. A Comparison of the Theologies of Augustine, Aquinas and Luther*.

But here again we meet issues which can be argued at such length that few people would listen to the end. Let us see whether the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which has the advantage of being unquestionably a magisterial decision, may not furnish a more expeditious criterion.

Gutwenger³² handles the Immaculate Conception by saying that Mary's (original) sinlessness³³ is to be viewed in the perspective of infant baptism. This sacrament imparts the Holy Spirit, who unites the person with Christ³⁴. Similarly, he says, Mary "stands always under the sign of Pentecost, and through the Spirit is united to the Word."³⁵

This is an interpretation of the Immaculate Conception in function of the gift of the Holy Spirit that Mary received in her initial grace, and as far as it goes it is unimpeachably orthodox. A person might be tempted to think he could restate it in terms of Gutwenger's system as meaning that Mary did not begin her existence in the state of incompleteness as do other human beings, but in a privileged state of actual union

³² Vanneste does not appear to speak of the Immaculate Conception, except in some brief remarks about Trent's handling of the subject, which shed no light on Vanneste's personal ideas.

³³ It is odd that he even avoids using the term Immaculate Conception here where it would naturally be expected (see the text cited above, in note 35), and instead speaks of Mary's "sinlessness." In truth, the former term would seem more compatible with his ideas, whereas the latter is, by his own declaration, meaningless when applied to an infant.

³⁴ "Wenn sich in der Kirche dennoch die Praxis der Kindertaufe herausbildete, hatte dies einen tiefen Sinn, weil durch die sakramentale Wiedergeburt der Hl. Geist, der Geist Christi ist, Geschenkt und durch ihn die Einheit mit Christus vollzogen wird" (p. 446).

From this language, it is not clear whether Gutwenger admits that the union with Christ is actually brought about in the infant at the moment the Spirit is received through baptism, or means that the Spirit who is received through baptism is the one who *will* bring about the union when eventually a personal decision for Christ is eventually made. The former interpretation would seem to be incongruous at least with his stress on the role of personal decision; but the latter would be plainly heretical.

³⁵ "Auf dieser Linie ist auch die Sündenlosigkeit Mariens zu sehen, die durch den Geist mit dem Logos verbunden und immer im Zeichen des Pfingstfestes zu verstehen ist."

with Christ through the Holy Spirit who has been imparted to her

However, this would contradict Gutwenger's cardinal principle, that only through a conscious personal decision can a human being be united with Christ so as to attain his fulfillment. Mary, therefore, although she was filled with the Holy Spirit from the beginning, still suffered from that incompleteness which for Gutwenger is the essence of original sin. When original sin is reduced to the fact that a person has not yet opted for Christ, then there is no way in which Mary can be preserved from it, no matter how great the grace bestowed on her, except on the old hypothesis of a miraculous knowledge infused into her at the instant of conception, which you can be sure Gutwenger would not be ready to concede. By the same token, baptism would not free other infants from original sin either. In sum, Gutwenger, having eliminated original sin from his system, has also emptied the Immaculate Conception of its proper meaning.

You might be inclined to think that this is only a matter of words; if Gutwenger admits that Mary, in her conception, was sanctified by the Spirit, what does it matter whether or not he says that she was preserved from original sin? In his system, original sin reduces to nothing other than the condition of infancy, from which there is no reason to preserve her. I believe the point makes a great difference, and involves much more than words. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is not primarily a dogma about Mary's grace; it is a dogma of her preservation from sin. All through those centuries when the Immaculate Conception was under debate, the issue before the bar of the conscience of the faithful was whether or not Mary had been exempted from that sin which is *de jure* universal to fallen humanity. The question of grace was raised only because it is indispensable for sinlessness in the present order, and because it enabled Mary's privilege to be situated in the perspective of the Redemption. But the

principal and substantial affirmation of the dogma is that Mary was preserved from the original sin that infects all other men; and it is this affirmation which Gutwenger reduces to meaninglessness³⁶

Substantially the same objection can be made against Vanneste, and in general against every theory that seeks to reduce original sin to immaturity (personal or social) thereby eliminating the notion of a fall³⁷ Immaturity and incompleteness belong to a different moral category from sinfulness, and it is an abuse of language to say that the one means the other The case of the Immaculate Conception merely highlights the abuse inasmuch as to suppose that Mary was preserved from natural human immaturity is clearly preposterous

II

The two main theories we have examined, that of Schoonenberg and that of Vanneste and Gutwenger, are very different from one another; yet they have much in common Both begin by setting aside the traditional belief that original sin consists in a congenital flaw such as concupiscence, or in the ties that relate a man back to his primordial ancestor. Instead, Schoonenberg looks outwards to the influence of the sinful community, while Vanneste and Gutwenger look forward at the gulf that separates man from Christ. The two theories are not at all incompatible with one another, and in fact the attempt has already been made by A Hulsbosch to combine them:

Original sin is the powerlessness, arising from nature, of man in

³⁶ Moreover, if one were to accept Gutwenger's view, Mary's grace would also disappear, because he removes the only motive the Church had for declaring that grace was given to Mary in her conception

³⁷ This point is strikingly confirmed by the language of *Ineffabilis Deus*, when it says that Mary was preserved from every "*labes*" of original sin English translations usually render this term as *stain*, but this is clearly inadequate The word rather designates the sort of injury or damage that is suffered from a fall Like the adjective *lapsus* and the secondary verb *labare*, the noun *labes* derives from the verb *labi*, which means to slide, slip, sink, fall, and so, by metonymy, to perish Fall is the first meaning of *labes* given by Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary*.

his uncompletedness as creature to reach his freedom and to realize the desire to see God, insofar as this impotence is put into the context of a sinful world.³⁸

That is to say, he places the incomplete man of Gutwenger into the sin situation of Schoonenberg, and calls that original sin. But the same incompatibility with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception appears in Hulsbosch's hybrid as in the two original strains taken separately.

There are two ways to react to this incompatibility. One way is to say, as we occasionally read in theological or would-be theological journals, that the new theology of original sin has made the Immaculate Conception meaningless. Some people welcome such a position with glee; for since the Immaculate Conception is one of the only two dogmas which they acknowledge to have been defined infallibly, to be thus unburdened of it would represent a fifty per cent increase in their intellectual freedom.

The other way, and to my mind the only way open to sincere Catholic faith, is to declare that if a theological speculation conflicts with dogma, the speculation must be in error, no matter how plausible it otherwise seems. This is a platitude, I know. But it is also a principle on which it is imperative to take a clear and strong stand in these days of confusion. Christian theology is the work of intelligence functioning within the faith; and the proximate rule of faith, for members of the Church, is the teaching of the *magisterium*. This applies to all members, whether they be theologians or ignoramuses (and it is apparently not impossible to be both).

However, we must look at this matter a little more closely, because the theories I have criticized do not contradict the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, they only make it meaningless. Could it not be argued that while infallible teachings are free from error, they are not necessarily meaningful?

I think not; this would be to jerk infallibility out of its

³⁸ A. Hulsbosch, O.S.A. *God in Creation and Evolution* (New York, 1965, from a Dutch original of 1963) 47.

organic place in the structure of the Church serving the life of faith. The infallible *magisterium* is not an autonomous phenomenon, a mighty work of God created just to dazzle the eyes of His chosen people; it has the serious function of presenting the truth of the Gospel to those whose life waits for this nourishment. For the *magisterium* to propose, as an object of faith demanding religious assent, a doctrine that is hollow of meaning, would be to set up an idol for the children of Israel to worship. It would be like a father giving his son a serpent instead of a fish, a scorpion instead of an egg. It is impossible to take seriously the assistance which the Holy Spirit gives to the *magisterium*, and then to dismiss as meaningless one of the most solemn and authoritative definitions it has ever made.

Gutwenger would retort that the decrees of the Church do not guarantee the truth of a doctrine, but only that it is a reliable guide to salvation.³⁹ Other doctrines might be equally reliable and are therefore not excluded. In my opinion, this position, which is becoming somewhat popular north and west of the Alps, has no basis in Catholic tradition. It is only a device to justify refusal to submit one's judgment to the *magisterium*. The doctrine which Christ taught was truth, not just a serviceable guide, and the authority given to the Apostles was intended to perpetuate Christ's own mission. The Church they shepherded was to be the "pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), not just of "Zuverlässigkeit" (trustworthiness).

There is another grave objection based on the history of the doctrines in question. Historically speaking, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception depends on that of original sin. The Immaculate Conception was not revealed directly and in itself.

³⁹ "Die Unfehlbarkeit eines Konzils dient ja letztendlich dazu, Heilsszuverlässigkeit zu garantieren. Wer also die augustinische Erbsünden-theologie [which, according to Gutwenger, is what Trent defined] annimmt, steht auf heilsszuverlässigem Weg. Doch ist nicht ausgeschlossen, dass eine andere Erklärung ebenso heilsszuverlässig ist (p. 445). * 17

The Church can be said to have discovered it only by meditating on the holiness of Mary for many centuries against the background of original sin. The latter doctrine held the field first, and when the Immaculate Conception came to be defined, it was formulated in function of the concept of original sin that was by then traditional. But if now we appeal to the Immaculate Conception as a criterion of theories about original sin, are we not caught in a vicious circle? If the traditional notion of original sin appears now to be mythical or culturally dated, should we not discuss this question simply in its own sphere, and then if need be revise the Immaculate Conception accordingly?

This objection requires a long, complicated answer, of which only a sketch can be given here. In the first place, Christ did not teach His doctrines in clear, precise, autonomous propositions. Rather He taught by examples, hints and implication in the events of Salvation history and in the moral attitudes He inculcated. Consequently, the meaning of a doctrine is seldom if ever attainable by the simple intellectual analysis of a statement. Rather, it is necessary that more or less all the different elements of Christ's teaching and works germinate in the mind and heart of the Church, conditioning and fecundating one another. Each point of doctrine is clarified and determined by others, in function of what is sometimes called the analogy of faith.

This germination and clarification does not take place by a steady, equal march, but by a kind of leapfrog process, in which one doctrine is borne on the shoulders of another for a while, and then it in its own turn must boost the other forward. Thus, we have the paradox that for some fifteen centuries, original sin was one of the most solidly established and firmly settled articles of faith, while the Immaculate Conception was either quite undreamed of, bitterly debated, or left hanging in puzzled suspense. Anything that might be said about the Immaculate Conception had to be made to square with the dogma of original sin. And now, within a single

century, we have seen these roles reversed. The Immaculate Conception enjoys the security of a dogmatic definition, while original sin is feverishly subjected to question.

This is not anomalous, it fulfills a law of the development of ideas, whether in faith or philosophy. As in mountain climbing, one man gets a firm hold and then helps another up, and they alternate by turns; so in the evolution of doctrine there occur privileged moments when a truth is clear and firm, and can be used as a point of reference for others. Then, as perspectives change, that which had been clear may again become obscure, and need to be secured by other doctrines which previously depended on it.

In natural human life, this means that a truth, once discovered, may be lost again (Teilhard de Chardin to the contrary notwithstanding). But in the life of the Church, the *magisterium* is able to intervene, take hold of an insight which may have been caught by the *sensus fidelium*, and give it an authority, firmness and certitude that it never could have gotten from public opinion alone. Thus, what was the vision of one privileged moment in history is turned into a beacon and buoy for all future ages.

The definition of the Immaculate Conception constitutes such a case. In the nineteenth century, there came a moment, prepared by many centuries of questioning and debate, when the faith of the Church was united on this point, not just in weary acquiescence, but in conscious, firm conviction. At that moment, it became possible to define the belief as an article of faith; and from then on, it became a reliable dogma by which other doctrines could also be measured. This occurred just as developments in science, philosophy and exegesis were preparing to cast a great murky shadow on the doctrine of original sin; and now this doctrine, which once seemed so stable as to be beyond question, can rely on the Immaculate Conception to shelter it against attack.

Finally, the conflict between these new theories and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception does not lie merely on

the intellectual plane. In fact, the most significant aspect about this opposition is that it touches on the domain of piety. If my analysis of the theories above considered is correct, they destroy an important part of the object and nutriment of Christian piety. For the Immaculate Conception is not merely an academic thesis; it is a key to the image of Mary as she is venerated in the Church. She is not simply a woman called to give birth to the Messiah; she was prepared for this role by a grace of privileged sinlessness. Hence, she is venerated as the unique person in whom human nature is not spoiled by original sin, but fulfills perfectly the designs of the Creator. She is the ideal of human nature actually realized; and as such the Church venerates and loves her.

Therefore, any theory that makes the Immaculate Conception meaningless is to that extent the enemy of Christian piety. It ceases to be the harmless vagary of a well-meaning theologian, and becomes corrosive of the true substance of Christian life. For many people this will be the decisive criterion of its erroneous character. If only intellectual objections were raised against it they might not be concerned about it; but one who has a lively devotion to Mary, formed and nourished by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, so that this mystery lives in his faith, will reject error about this doctrine with all the vigor of a living being reacting against a hostile organism.⁴⁰

This paper has had a negative tone that I regret very much. I do not like to see dogma used as a club to intimidate the temerity of speculative theologians. I agree also that modern scientific and exegetical developments have posed serious problems for the classical theology of original sin, and I welcome fresh and original thought on this matter (particularly when it takes the trouble to know the classical theology accurately!).

⁴⁰ Note that I am not implying that piety is the criterion of doctrinal orthodoxy. The affective life must be governed by the cognitive, not vice-versa. That is why this paper has been devoted mainly to discussing, on an intellectual plane, the incompatibility of the theories considered with the doctrine of the Church. Nevertheless, the human intellect is a groping,

And if a theologian bold enough to wrestle with these difficult problems sometimes loses his footing, he ought not to be condemned for that.

Nevertheless, once a theology has been proposed, we must ask the hard question, how it squares with the teachings of faith. If it is right (as indeed it is) to be concerned about satisfying the legitimate demands of the modern mind, it is also right, and even more necessary, to be concerned about the exigencies of the Christian faith. Original sin is not a philosophical theorem; it is part of the Gospel message. It is a light (a dark light indeed in more ways than one) shed by divine wisdom on the human situation, and its rays are far more precious than the rational clarity of our theories.

A correct view about Mary has often been, in history, the touchstone of sensitivity to some of the more delicate aspects of the mystery of Christ. So likewise the Immaculate Conception may serve today to compel us to be loyal to the authentic meaning of this negative, but indispensable background to Christ, the mystery of original sin.

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stumbling faculty, which has a hard time thinking through the implications of an idea, and is wise when it mistrusts its own judgments. Often we cannot be certain of the truth or error of a theory until we have had experience of its fruits in the practical order. In the case of matters of faith, this means (in part) the order of piety.

Also, man is not stirred to action by ideas in his intellect, but by the affections. Hence, it is a least natural if many people do not react against intellectual errors until they bear some fruit that shows up in the affective life.

⁴¹ In this context, I would like to draw attention to the essay which Piet Smulders presents as Appendix III to *The Design of Teilhard de Chardin* (Newman, 1967). It is an attempt to present the traditional doctrine of original sin in an evolutionary perspective and system of concepts. I do not find it to be by any means a satisfactory theory; I wonder if it has even met the graver problems. Nevertheless, it is written in a spirit of fidelity to doctrine, openness to contemporary scholarship, and sensitivity to modern problems, that deserve to be taken as a model for all engaged in similar efforts.