

What the Catholic Church Teaches

About Original Sin

According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, original sin is regarded as the general condition of sinfulness (the absence of holiness and perfect charity) into which humans are born, different from the actual sins that a person commits. This teaching states that "original sin does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants". In other words, human beings do not bear any "original guilt" from Adam and Eve's particular sin.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church 416 - 418 says:

By his sin Adam, as the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, not only for himself but for all humans. Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called "original sin". As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called "concupiscence").

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that in "yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state ... original sin is called "sin" only in an analogical sense: it is a sin "contracted" and not "committed" — a state and not an act" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 404). This "state of deprivation of the original holiness and justice ... transmitted to the descendants of Adam along with human nature" (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 76) involves no personal responsibility or personal guilt on their part (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 405). The personal responsibility and guilt were Adam's, and because of his sin he was unable to pass on to his descendants the original holiness with which they should have been blessed. The doctrine of original sin does not impute the sin of the father to his children, but merely states that they inherit from him a "human nature deprived of original holiness and justice", which is "transmitted by propagation to all mankind" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 404).

Though Adam's sinful act is not the responsibility of his descendants, the state of human nature that has resulted from that sinful act has consequences that plague them: "Human nature, without being entirely corrupted, has been harmed in its natural powers, is subject to ignorance, suffering and the power of death, and has a tendency to sin. This tendency is called concupiscence" (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 77), but concupiscence is distinct from original sin itself, since it remains even when original sin is remitted.