

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC PARISHES OF



ASSUMPTION  
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Dear Parishioners,

As we see the continuing human toll the COVID 19 pandemic takes, we begin to witness, too, another face of the human reaction to this impersonal health crisis: the search for scapegoats. The search for scapegoats is as old as human beings when confronted with forces over which they seem to have no control. Think of the story of Jonah and the whale, when the superstitious mariners on the little boat tossed by the sea of a violent storm turn against Jonah (*Jonah 1:7,15*):

The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.

Helplessness, frustration, anger, lashing out: “There must be a reason why this has happened” we say to ourselves. “Someone must be to blame.” So we search for the human error—and the human sinner—on which we can peg all responsibility. The disorder in the natural order, we argue, must be the fault of some human being. So we look for an answer in the errors—and the sins—of our fellow human beings.

Certainly, the errors and wrongdoings of human beings may aggravate an already bad natural disaster, but it is quite another thing to say that the wrong-doing of a human being is the root cause of that natural disaster.

A virus, itself, is not caused by any personal human wrongdoing. So the search for a scapegoat in such circumstances makes no sense, and brings us nowhere closer to addressing the remedy for the illness. Scientists continue to seek a vaccine and they continue to seek understanding how the virus originated, but for the moment the only way to stop the spread of the virus is by social distancing.

If one wishes to look for “root” causes beyond the natural ones, then perhaps we might dust off and look again at a theological reality that we don’t speak of very much anymore, at least in any meaningful way: original sin.

Original sin, theologians tell us quite clearly, is only described as a “sin” as a sort of analogy to personal or “actual” sin. Original sin is about a *state of reality* rather than a human *act*. The human language lacks an adequate vocabulary, so we use a word that we better understand, but which does not entirely capture the reality of the state in which we human beings find ourselves in relation to God and to other creatures. “In the beginning” there was a fundamental order and harmony between Creator and creature, but through the deliberate choice to turn away from God, and because in some mysterious way it was done by our primordial parents—named in the Book of Genesis as Adam and Eve—this fundamental “turning away” has introduced a disorder in the general state of our relationship to God and to the world. (For further reading see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 385 – 421.)

It is a difficult thing to grasp, but the effects of original sin are clear: there is a disharmony—a disorder—in our fundamental relationship with God and with other creatures, and in the created order itself. The world is in a state of “upset”, if you will, as a result of original sin; things are “knocked out of whack”. And while the healing waters of baptism remove the “guilt” of original sin in the human person, and restore a relationship of love between the individual human creature and God their Creator, we know all too well that the “effects” of original sin remain. On a personal level, this means that we are still “weak”, we still have difficulty discerning what is right and choosing what is good. We are often “confused” and have difficulty seeing our way clearly.

It is, in a way, like any human relationship when we “turn away” from the one we love and who loves us; when we fail to take them into account in our decisions and our actions. A “disorder” is introduced into the human relationship by our turning away from our friend; a wound is opened up, a wound that needs to be healed and restored.

We must not forget that the Easter “work” of Jesus is not only about us human beings. There is more to creation than just us. The redemption Our Lord won for us through the Cross is not just individual. Human beings are set in a special relationship with all of creation; surely this is one of the great lessons of the story of creation in Genesis: we are in a relationship to the rest of creation as *good stewards* of God’s goods. All of creation shares in some way in the redemptive and saving action of Jesus. This is the meaning behind those mysterious words of St. Paul: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved” (Rom 8:22-24).

At such a promise to restore the harmony that was created from the beginning, we might wonder and marvel. And wait. The harmony is not yet fully restored, and the “effects” of original sin remain. If there is a scapegoat for natural disasters, it is not to be found in the personal sins of human creatures—we do not seek to throw Jonah overboard—but in the continuing effects of original sin—in a state of disharmony which still grips our world.

The reality of original sin does not, of course, help us treat and find a vaccine for the virus; that is the heroic work of medical practitioners and scientists. But the reality of “the Fall” does shed light on how we confront even such momentous events as natural disasters. It sheds light, in other words, on how we treat one another, the world around us, and God Himself in this life that is given to us.

Times of crisis are moments to stop and take stock; they are not moments to seek easy answers or shortcuts to healing. They can be graced moments to rediscover things we have become blinded to in our headlong rush to goals which, for all their value, may yet be secondary. The challenge in any crisis is to dust off the essentials that we thought, perhaps, we could dispense with because they are uncomfortable and challenge us in ways we do not find easy. But facing such a challenge brings with it the hope, too, of discovering anew something deep within us, something essential in our relationship with God, with others, with all of creation, and with ourselves.

In one of the invocations for the Universal Prayers of the Divine Office during the Octave of Easter, we pray:

*You alone can reconcile human beings and create a new spirit within them;  
End the conflicts which divide our world.  
- Lord stay with us always!*

Fr. Philip Creurer  
*Pastor*