

THE TEACHING CHURCH

Original Sin— Misleading Truism

No place here for modern semi Pelagianism.

Probably in the whole province of theology there is no more unfortunate or misleading term than "original sin." Everyone knows roughly what is meant by the expression. It is an attempt to name the evil impulses or the inertia which act upon us in such a way as to cause us to confess with St. Paul: "The good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I do." The term is unsatisfactory, because "sin" ought to be used strictly to describe those acts which a man knows to be wrong. Sin, properly speaking, is a definite wrong choice; the weakness which contributed to that choice is an infirmity and ought to be so named. The subject is not an abstruse and remote matter which can be left in the hands of the learned, because it has a practical bearing upon the power we possess to make a truly free choice in our actions. The sensible person does not talk lightly about "free will." He endeavours to estimate the enemy and grasp what the Church has to say upon the matter.

Fall or Transgression?

It is clear that the third chapter of Genesis does not explain the origin of evil. The evil will is displayed by the serpent, but nothing is said to suggest the manner in which the serpent came to possess the evil will. Man is shown as easily deceived, enticed into an act of disobedience, which is plainly sin, because he recognises the command of God and his duty towards Him. As to why that choice should be made, there is no explanation, neither can there be. The fact that disobedience is attractive to us is just the riddle of human nature. Clearly the story owes its origin to meditation upon the fact of penitence.

The difficulties begin when enlargements are made upon the story. We have the quite imaginary descriptions of the spiritual and intellectual powers of Adam when he was in the state of innocence. These are so amazing and superhuman that comparison of these alleged powers with the present condition of the human race leads to the conception of a disastrous "fall" in the full sense of the term. So severely has the "fall" been thought of that mankind has been described as "a mass of sins," incapable of good and the virtues of the heathen have even been spoken of as "splendid vices."

On the other hand, the Greek Fathers looked upon Adam as a child who had to learn, as we do, by process of trial and error. To them the "fall" was a transgression or stepping aside from the true path which left the will enfeebled by the effect of a wrong choice, but they did not suppose that man was subsequently incapable of any good. There is little doubt as to which view has the support of modern anthropology.

Pelagianism.

Pelagius disregarded the experience of the weakness of human nature, and it appears to be fair to say that he taught that a man can by his own mere effort of will achieve the good and annul the effect of his own past. He is the father of the people who are prepared to sing, "I am the captain of my soul." But is it so certain that a man can achieve this? The state of freedom to which a man can attain at any given moment is determined at least by the following things. There is the strength of the ego and sex

instincts fighting against the comparatively weak social instincts. There is the cumulative effect of past wrong choices which have developed into evil sentiments. There is the weight of evil example all round us. Can we turn from these things just by an unaided act of our own will? Surely St. Paul is to be followed here: "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Church's Real Teaching.

In searching for the real teaching of the Church upon this subject we can hardly do better than consider carefully the prayers used in the worship of the Church. On the necessity of the grace of God to inspire us to good works and to keep us in the same there is a long list of collects, among them those for Trinity 1, 4, 9, 13, 15, 19. The Church confesses plainly this sense of the weakness of our nature and the necessity of the constant effort to wait upon God if we are really to use our nature outright. There is no place here for modern semi-pelagianism, which speaks of the abuse of our free will as though it were some kind of independent possession to be used apart from the constant assistance of the grace of God. Probably the collect for Epiphany 4 teaches us this as clearly as any other.

"O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright. Grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

S.F.N.W.