

Genesis (or understood by St. Augustine). However, there was no ‘personal evil’ because no creature until the emergence of Man was capable of knowing God or had the capability of sinning through the improper use of free-will.

The first Man was created in God’s image because he had **self-consciousness, a ‘natural’ knowledge of right and wrong, free-will, and a sense of the divine.** Original Righteousness really refers to the **original, childlike innocence** Man first possessed. In that state he would automatically have entered Heaven. He was able to withstand temptation because he had God’s special grace (called habitual grace). It was **not impossible** for him to sin (non posse peccare) but he had the capability **not to sin** (posse non peccare). The first Man was **not** born into a Paradise where the presence of God would **ensure** there was no sin. Remember, sin occurred because temptation was not resisted. Two further points are crucial: temptation can **not** occur in ‘Heaven’ in the real presence of God, and the role of the serpent in Genesis 3 shows the existence of evil **before** the first human sin. The latter emphasises the existence of ‘Satan’, an evil entity, and points to another truth, that a similar process had already occurred in the spiritual domain.

Is Death the Result of Sin?

The Church has taught, based on Genesis 3:19 and Rm. 5:17, that because of the first sin, Man became subject to death. By implication he would not have died if he had not sinned. However, the intended meaning of ‘death’ needs to be clarified. If Man was created as part of the material world then it is unrealistic to believe that he would never have died. Also, if the state of Original Righteousness was only **original innocence** and **not** the perfect situation often depicted, then the first Man had **yet** to reach that state of perfection all of us can only find in Heaven, and real immortality with a new divinised Body (1 Cor.15). On this line of reasoning, if the first Man had not sinned, he would **still** have been required to die and would have died, but with the **certainty** of seeing God and **without any fear of death.** Therefore, the loss of Original Righteousness, the ‘return to dust’ of Genesis 3, and the type of death St. Paul describes, **really refers to spiritual** death, the loss of **automatic** entry into Heaven and to the **fear of death** we now experience. In any event 1 Cor.15 and 1 Thess.4, relating to questions about bodily resurrection, both reveal St. Paul really accepted that people would continue to die as before.

How Can Original Sin be Inherited - What is it Really?

‘Original Sin’ refers to the fact that the Original (but not perfect) Righteousness that was lost was **also** lost for all humankind. **It meant the intended pathway to God was now closed to us.** It was no longer possible for subsequent offspring to be united with God on their deaths as originally intended. Its loss also had the effect of making us **inclined** to sin rather than with the grace to resist it naturally. The salvation brought by Jesus is the **reopening** of the original pathway to God, and is made possible by the sacrament of Baptism.

Our Catholic Faith

11. Original Sin

- How Should We Really Understand This Difficult Truth of Faith?



Questions for Reflection

1. Can evolutionary theory be reconciled with the creation account in Genesis 2?
2. If the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 is a mythical explanation of the human condition, what is the real significance of Original Sin?
3. Would the first humans really not have died but for Original Sin?

What is the Doctrine of Original Sin?

The Church teaches that God made Humankind in a state of what is called **Original Righteousness**, a state of holiness and harmony with God, but that this was lost by sin, leading to a disordered and suffering humanity with an inclination to sin (concupiscence). This teaching is based on the story of Adam and Eve (Gen..3) where the first sin occurs because of a temptation set by a serpent. However, the basics of the story are not original to the Bible as they are common to the beliefs of the Ancient Near East. What the author of the story added was to show that Man fell from his previous harmonious relationship with God into his present state. In this sense it is an aetiology or explanation of sin. Further, the Church teaches that this sin of Adam and Eve is transmitted by generation to all humans and is called **Original Sin**. It is the implications of this teaching that provide the basis for Baptism as a sacrament, to ensure that this inherited sin is removed and harmony with God restored..

However, it must be stated that there is **no** specific teaching of Original Sin in the Bible. St. Paul does refer to sin and death entering the world through one man: **“It was through this one man that sin entered the world and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned”** (Rm. 5:12) but this is just Paul’s explanation for why everyone sins and is subject to death.

The doctrine was first really developed by St. Augustine to combat two dangerous heresies, **Manichaeism** and **Pelagianism**. The former taught that there were two equal but opposing forces, Good and Evil, and Man at the bodily level can only do evil. The latter believed the opposite, that Man could, of his own efforts, without grace, do good because he was not affected by Adam’s sin. Augustine sought a middle ground between these extremes. Against the Manicheans, he stated that Man was not created evil but in a state of harmony with God. This was lost when Adam sinned and, against the Pelagians, the result was that Man was now in a state of spiritual disorder with a definite inclination towards sin. However, he was not completely incapable of doing good but this depended on the grace of God, **not** on his own independent efforts.

What is Difficult about the Doctrine?

The way the doctrine has been presented over the centuries, particularly the way a literal interpretation of Genesis 3 was implied by the the Decree on Original Sin at the Council of Trent 1546, has very often tended to make it something of an embarrassment in the light of evolutionary theory. In particular, the following difficulties need clarification:

1. Do we have to believe God created Adam as in Genesis 2?
2. Do we have to accept a literal interpretation of Genesis 3?



3. What exactly is the Original Righteousness that was lost?
4. Would the first Man never have died had Original Righteousness not been lost? In other words, is death the result of sin as St. Paul seemed to imply in Romans 5?
5. Finally, how can any sin be inherited? That is more a question about what does Original Sin really mean?



Do We Have To Believe God Created Adam and Eve as in Genesis 2?

The short answer is no. The point of the story of Man’s creation is to show that Man has been created in the image and likeness of God, that is, he has been specially chosen by God to share in his divine life. The author wrote that truth through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but in a way that reflected his current knowledge and cultural understanding. That is the real definition of a Myth - not something that is completely untrue, but a story that expresses a **deep spiritual truth** within an artificial narrative structure. The story only conflicts with evolutionary theory if the nature of mythological writing is not appreciated. It is quite acceptable within Catholic teaching to understand that at some point within evolution God ‘decided’ to create a special creature with whom he wanted to share his love. Man was that creature, a new species evolved from primates.

All we need to accept, like science accepts, is that Man, from not existing as Man then came into being. He was procreated from some primate couple yet with different ‘mutant’ genes. This special creature in turn bred to produce more of his species that would dominate the planet - **Us**. Against those who find it repulsive to think that Man could be descended from ape-like creatures, who are they to argue with God’s methods, if indeed evolution is true. The whole of the book of Job reminds us that we can not understand God’s purposes and should accept them for what they are no matter our personal inclinations: **“Do you really want to reverse my judgements, to put me in the wrong and yourself in the right?”** (Job 40). If evolution into Man is not true then that will reveal itself in due course, by God’s will. In the meantime, the reality is that both evolution and God’s special creation of Man are easily reconcilable beliefs

Do We Have To Accept a Literal Interpretation of Genesis 3?

Again, no we do not. That story reflects the truth that at some point the first Man did use his free-will to sin, thereby losing his right to be united with God. It is also offers an explanation for man’s present state of suffering and feeling of alienation.

What Exactly is Original Righteousness?

The first Man came into a world where there was **no sin**. There were natural disasters, like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, that could destroy life and so natural evil’ already existed and had done so for millions of years e.g. seen in the ‘extinction of the dinosaurs. This world is not the perfect Paradise depicted in