“Adrien Nocent was truly a remarkable scholar well ahead of his time! First published in English in 1977, we cannot today but be astonished at the depth of theological and pastoral insight on the Lectionary and liturgies in this . . . multivolume work on the liturgical year. . . . In this reissue, Fr. Paul Turner sensitively respects Nocent’s own voice as he bridges the time after the Council to the present age: he emends the text to render it in horizontal inclusive language, redresses some theological and historical issues, and includes the latest translation of the liturgical text. This work needs to be on every priest’s, liturgist’s, musician’s, and assembly member’s ‘go-to’ shelf.”

Joyce Ann Zimmerman, CPPS, Institute for Liturgical Ministry

“Though originating in the postconciliar period, Adrien Nocent’s volumes remain one of the church’s finest commentaries on the Lectionary and contain remarkable, up-to-date insights for our times. Thanks to the emendations and annotations of Paul Turner, one of today’s finest liturgical scholars, these volumes will enrich the thoughts of parish liturgists, presiders, homilists, musicians, lectors, theology students, and participants in the church’s liturgy.”

Stephen J. Binz, biblical scholar, author of *Conversing with God in Advent and Christmas* (also *Conversing with God in Lent* and *Conversing with God in the Easter Season*)

“Aggiornamento is back! Paul Turner has updated . . . Adrien Nocent’s *The Liturgical Year* in a discrete, respectful, and informed manner, enabling the author’s reflections on the feasts and seasons as well as on the Lectionary to connect effectively with the concerns and interests of present-day readers.”

Patrick Regan, OSB, Saint Joseph Abbey, Saint Benedict, Louisiana

“In 1977 when Adrien Nocent’s book appeared in English translation, I was studying the liturgical year with him at Sant’Anselmo. I remember how moved I was to read his deep reflections after having experienced the new lectionary with its three-year cycle of readings at that point only a couple of times. Now, having experienced the three-year cycle more than a dozen times, I am still moved by his writings. I am delighted that his book has been updated by Paul Turner and is coming into print again.”

Michael S. Driscoll, Associate Professor, University of Notre Dame
“This new edition of Adrien Nocent’s *The Liturgical Year* dappers up an old friend! The passing of time and the introduction of the new translation of the Roman Missal had made the original edition of Nocent’s work more difficult to use. Now Paul Turner has done us a favor with this thorough revision: he has replaced prayer texts with the new translation, explained the context of some issues that have faded in the almost forty years since Nocent wrote the book, and emended Matthew J. O’Connell’s fine translation to make it more accessible to readers today. The virtues of Nocent’s original work (namely, his opening up of the reformed liturgical year through the lens of the lectionary and prayer texts of the Missal in the light of the history of the liturgy) can again serve preachers, liturgists, and lovers of the liturgy because of Turner’s fine work. It promises to be a key resource for another forty years.”

Rev. Michael Witczak, Associate Professor of Liturgical Studies, Catholic University of America

“Adrien Nocent’s *The Liturgical Year* offers the reader a wealth of biblical, liturgical, pastoral, and theological inspiration. The general introductions to the season, whether Lent, Holy Week, or Easter, as well as the profound reflections more specifically on the Sunday lectionary readings always serve to draw out the great Judeo-Christian themes of revelation: salvation history, creation in the image and likeness of God, sin, redemption, divinization, transformation into Christ, etc. Nocent manages marvelously to place the word in the dynamic context of the church’s liturgy, giving powerful expression to the word as Living Word, ancient and ever new. The writing style, so accessible in this fine translation, allows the author’s insights to stir the imagination, drawing us into a new wonder at the God who not simply entered into the human drama but ever walks the paths of our human story and stories. This fresh presentation of Nocent’s work seems particularly timely with the increasing calls of the church’s magisterium to a New Evangelization and Pope Francis’ own emphasis on the need to focus more intentionally on what is essential to the Gospel message. This resource will serve preachers well in giving vivid and substantial expression to the central and essential realities of our Catholic faith Sunday by Sunday.”

Rev. Anthony Oelrich, Pastor, St. Mary’s Cathedral, St. Cloud, Minnesota
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Abbreviations

AAS Acta Apostolicae Sedis
CCL Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina. Turnhout, 1953–
CL Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
CSEL Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. Vienna, 1866–
LH Liturgy of the Hours
SC Sources Chretiennes. Paris, 1942–
TPS The Pope Speaks. Washington, 1954–
Series Introduction

When the postconciliar lectionary first fell into the hands of priests, musicians, and parish liturgists in 1970, few could fully grasp the significance of the event. The vast selection of readings, the nimble choice of responsorial psalms, and the blossoming of the liturgical year would become clearer only in time.

One of the first companions to the revised lectionary was composed by Adrien Nocent, a Belgian monk who became a consultor for the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship in 1969. In 1964 he had served as a consultor for the Consilium for the Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. He was the secretary for the Consilium’s Study Group 17, which worked on the revision of Holy Week, and, among other responsibilities, was part of Study Group 11, which revised the Lectionary for Mass. He drew up the preliminary schemas for Advent, the Sundays after Epiphany, and the Sundays following Pentecost.

For Nocent, a commentary on the lectionary could not be a mere commentary on a book but an exploration of the dialogue between the Word of God and humanity in every culture and time. The Church had been through only one complete three-year cycle of the lectionary when Nocent was writing this book. He shared his vision of this project for eager readers, students, and worshipers.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Liturgical Press is proud to reissue Nocent’s work. I was deeply honored at the invitation to contribute annotations—honored because when I was in the seminary, *The Liturgical Year* was the main resource I consulted to prayerfully approach my participation in the Sunday Mass; honored because as a young priest, I used *The Liturgical Year* to help prepare my homilies; honored because as a liturgical catechist, my brain had been hardwired to Nocent’s approach to the lectionary: Start with the gospel, then look at the first reading, then the psalm, and be ready to discard the second reading from your treatment of the Sunday lectionary.
Readers today may criticize Nocent’s approach as too “thematic” in content. He presumes that each Sunday carries a theme and that he knows what it is. In reality, there is no single theme, and the second reading deserves its place in the sun. Still, in practice, Nocent’s ability to explain the layout of the lectionary is still vital. Although a specialist in liturgy, he reveals himself as a most capable biblical exegete; although a man of philosophical depth, he constantly returns to the question of relevance: What does this passage have to say to us today? I have added a few annotations where I thought the reader needed a bridge between Nocent’s day and our own, but I have kept these at a minimum to let the author’s voice speak.

I have also refrained from changing too much of Matthew J. O’Connell’s fine original translation. He wrote before issues of gender-inclusive language became important, however, and I felt that the book could not be reissued without attention to this detail. The greatest number of changes I introduced to the translation have to do with this concern. I have also emended O’Connell’s work where I thought it needed greater clarity due to the length of sentences, obscure vocabulary, or theological imprecisions. Otherwise, again, I wanted his voice to win.

Nocent’s seven-volume work in French, which had been rearranged into four volumes in English, is now redistributed again into three. All the material is here, along with Nocent’s desire to share his profound faith and scholarship. I am confident that you, the reader, will meet a friend, a spiritual father, and a compelling mentor in Adrien Nocent.

Paul Turner
Lent
Introduction

This volume on the liturgical year will follow the pattern adopted in the other two volumes. First, we shall attempt to give the reader greater access to the theology of Lent by asking as honestly as we can whether that theology has anything to say to us and our contemporary concerns. Then, we shall examine the texts used in the celebrations and the manner in which they complement one another. Finally, we shall point out the various ways in which Lent was celebrated by the Roman Church and other Churches in centuries past.

It hardly needs to be said that we cannot aim at completeness. Lent, after all, has six Sundays, each with a three-year cycle of readings; it also has a special celebration for each weekday. On the other hand, we think that what should be important for us is not so much the details but a mentality we ought to make our own. The purpose of acquiring this mentality is not to abandon our contemporary outlook and adopt an older one but to enrich what we now have and to achieve a personal synthesis that can guide our lives.

It seems worth recalling here a point we made in volume 1 with regard to the reading of Scripture in the liturgy. The liturgy must, of course, take into account the data of scientific exegesis and find support in it. At the same time, however, if we wish to grasp the message being conveyed in the liturgical proclamation of a passage from the gospels, we must keep in mind that the liturgical vision of such a passage is not the same as the exegetical vision of the same text. One and the same text receives different emphases when it is proclaimed in different celebrations, since the other two readings provide a new context and point to the primary meaning the gospel has in a particular liturgy. In other words, the liturgical season and the first two readings of the Mass—or at least one of these two readings—will lead us to read the gospel from a special point of view. This does not mean that we elaborate a new exegesis each time the same passage recurs; it means simply that the Church approaches the text from a new angle of vision. This, at any rate, is the way we shall be looking at the texts in each of the celebrations we are studying.
Biblico-Liturgical Reflections on Lent

1. THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF LENT

What God Creates Is Divine

We are so used to seeing the defects and faults of the beings and the things around us that we find it difficult to pass an accurate judgment on the value, meaning, and purpose of creation. It may also be that a certain kind of religious education and a poorly understood liturgy have contributed to our having a rather pessimistic view of the created world.

On the First Sunday of Lent, for example, the first reading (Year A) tells us of the Fall and thus of the inability of the first human couple to resist temptation (Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7). When we hear it often enough, we end up thinking that it is describing humanity’s natural condition. Once we acquire this mentality, life becomes difficult. Either we succumb to a kind of fatalism with regard to sin and accustom ourselves to accepting the disastrous situation of sin and its effects, or else we live with a constant sense of overwhelming anxiety and of the shadowy character of human existence.

Are such attitudes a proper response to the true meaning of creation? Certainly not. But, on the other hand, can we be surprised to find people abandoning in despair a religion that is presented to them as a kind of poultice applied to an incurable wound, a religion that looks upon a human as a fallen being, a weak thing who is offered Christian morality as a crutch or a form of opium for the people?

We must admit that some presentations of Lent utterly fail to give people a proper sense of what they really are in the midst of God’s creation. The formula, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” which for centuries accompanied the imposition of ashes, was not calculated to give the recipient a positive vision of Lent, any more than was the account of the Fall, read on the First Sunday of Lent. If people have only this one-sided vision of things, they will see humanity and its history as a failure and will not be encouraged to try to patch up a situation so radically compromised.
If, then, we are to understand the real situation of humanity and of the world, we must tackle the problem afresh. We must bear in mind, however, that the Church presents her interpretation of the world’s history only to believers. It is not that she refuses to speak of it to others but rather that in her liturgy she handles these problems, not as merely intellectual challenges, but as problems whose answers are to influence the way we live. Consequently, when she describes the Fall, her concern is to make us understand our human condition, not merely or primarily as wretched, but also and above all as marked by the great certainty that has power to deliver us from our wretchedness; for she shows us that God is capable of creating only what is divine.

The liturgy, like the Bible, is therefore offering us not an explanation but a sign; it tells us that creation is a language in which God expresses himself. We might even say that creation is a process wherein God reveals himself. And often he reveals himself as a Father.

We can see immediately that the facile contrast between the distant, terrible God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament who is so close to us has no solid foundation. Ever since the final age, the time of salvation, began, the Church has been urging us to read the account in Genesis, even while she shows us the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The fact that she can do both without any sense of a tension between them shows us what she is about. She is not presenting us with a religious philosophy or a humanism or a method for developing humanity’s powers. No, she is urging upon us a bold project legitimated by a command of Christ himself: “[B]e perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

The account in Genesis tells us that we are made in God’s image. Here, in the New Testament, we are told more specifically just what this image is. A paradox, is it not? On the one hand, a God who is the inaccessible, transcendent Creator; on the other, ever since the time of Abraham, a gracious, condescending God who draws closer and closer to us and to whom we in turn can draw ever closer, to the point where we receive the command to imitate him. But the apparent contradiction is resolved by the fact that it is Christ who gives this order. For he is our salvation, and in him we discover the humanity of God. St. John records these most meaningful words of Christ: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Consequently, when the Church reads the account of creation to us each year during the Easter Vigil, she thinks of it not as an isolated
episode but rather as the culmination of the revelation begun in that account. She thinks of the Trinity, into whose life we enter by way of the humanity of the Risen Christ. Though the account in Genesis speaks only of God as Creator and Father of the universe, the Church has before her eyes the whole history of salvation. In the account of creation, she contemplates the germinal presence of all the great and wonderful deeds that God will perform for the salvation of the world, especially the sending of his Son and the activity of his Spirit. This Creator-God, Father of the universe, is the God whom Jesus will show us and who is already revealing himself in the initial act of creation.

How can we belong to the people of God and become part of the “wonderful deeds” that mark this people’s history if we do not believe in the fatherhood of God as revealed by his Son? The Church indicates to us how the new creation is already implied in the account of the first creation. For, in the story of Jesus’ baptism, we see the Spirit descending on the waters, just as he did at the beginning of the world, except that in his descent at the Jordan he officially appoints Christ, the new Adam, to his messianic role.

Christians have to relearn that they belong to the family of God. A more habitual reading of Paul and John will give them a sense of their divine adoption and of their divinization by the filial Spirit of God’s Son. At the same time, they will be able to understand the strength of the bonds that link them to Christ, and the transcendent unity whereby all Christians are gathered into one body so that they may share in the very life of God.

Yet, even this renewed awareness may remain abstract or be inspired simply by humanity’s age-old yearning for immortality unless, with the help of the Old Testament, it recovers a sense of its authentic human roots. The family of God is, first of all, Israel. When the Son of God became a human, he was “born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4), and was “descended from David according to the flesh” (Rom 1:3). The entire people of God was of one race with its Christ, and every word in the Bible is a stammering of his Word. If, then, we are to belong to the race or family of God, we must belong by adoption to the race or family of the spiritual Israel.¹

The Inaccessible God in Our Midst

Such a reading of Genesis evidently looks beyond the level of mere story. It shows us what our God is like and how we are to relate to
him. We glimpse the face of God, but that face, close to us though it is, is never fully unveiled.

Thus, to be aware of God’s nearness and humanness does not mean that we abandon our attitude of respect, reverential fear, and adoration. We retain always a clear vision of our total dependence on him whose “thoughts are not our thoughts” and who always remains incomprehensible and inaccessible. The Church does not hesitate to remind the faithful of this again and again. “Perhaps the most difficult thing required of the Christian is to accept the inaccessibility of God. But when one does so, one will also understand the nearness and the humanness of God.”²

**Father of the Universe**

There is a further point that we cannot pass over in silence, for unless we grasp it, we may radically misunderstand the plan of redemption and the life of the Church. The point is this: The Church preaches to us a God who is the Creator not only of the isolated individual but also of all other human beings and of the entire universe. Adam was placed in paradise as a person intimately involved with the beings that surrounded him. In fact, in the view of the fathers, God created the whole of humankind as a single totality, and it is this unity, which extends to the uttermost depths of every being, that explains how one man’s sin could implicate the whole human race. But the same unity also explains how redemption could be accomplished by the sacrifice of the new Adam: “By the sacrifice of Christ the first human was saved, that human who is in us all.”³

Christians cannot, therefore, have the right attitude toward their Creator unless they stand before him with a soul that is open not only to other human beings but to all created things, animate and inanimate, and indeed to the universe in its entirety. For the latter, like humanity itself, has been redeemed. To put it another way, it is the whole person, and not just one’s soul, that God has created and that Christ has redeemed, and the resurrection of the flesh implies in turn the restoration of the universe as a whole. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul gives us his thinking on these matters, and there is no reason to believe that he is simply indulging in metaphor:

*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. For creation awaits with*
eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was
made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one
who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from
slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children
of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until
now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of
the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the
redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:18-23)

It is important for Christians to bear in mind that salvation em-
braces our whole being, body no less than soul, and also the whole
of creation, including all that is subhuman in it. In setting our sights
on the definitive kingdom to come, we must therefore not separate
into watertight compartments the spiritual and the fleshly, the soul
and the body, the things of the spirit and material things. The world
to come presupposes that all the various orders of being are given
their proper value and brought into perfect harmony and balance.

Humanity is indeed the center of creation, and everything else was
created for its sake. This means, however, that subhuman creation
has a place in an overall unity willed by God. It means too that Adam
was put into the world as a cosmic personage, one linked to the rest
of creation by an ontological bond. From the very beginning of Lent,
therefore, the Church already has in mind the night of the Easter
Vigil, when she will read the opening pages of Genesis to those who
are about to be buried with Christ in death in order that they may
rise with him to new life. Then the newly baptized will understand
those pages with minds reborn.

The Fall

We must acknowledge, however, that the Fall is indeed a central
focus of the Lenten liturgy. It is not the only theme, as we have seen,
but certainly the fact of the Fall and its consequences are everywhere
present in the celebrations of this season.

It is, then, the Church’s wish that her faithful, present and future,
should be confronted with the fact of sin. Here again, however, the
book of Genesis cannot be properly understood except in the context
provided by the other books of Scripture. In point of fact, it was only
through concrete experience and the enlightenment bestowed by the
Spirit that Israel came to understand original sin. A series of
disillusionsments, cataclysms, and personal and collective failures made people aware of the existence of a single, first sin in which all shared. St. Paul would later say that “Jews and Greeks alike . . . are all under the domination of sin” (Rom 3:9) and that “through one transgression condemnation came upon all” (Rom 5:18).

We are all prisoners of sin. The Old Testament had various descriptive words for sin, but gradually it tended toward a single, unequivocal understanding of it. Sin is an action that fails of its end. More concretely, it is an action in which we fail with regard to another person. It is “a violation of the bond which unites persons to each other, an act which, because it does not respect this organic bond, only affects the person concerned by injuring him.”

Yet, there is nothing pessimistic about the liturgy’s very realistic vision of a world destroyed by sin. The aim is rather that Christians should become aware of their sinful state and have a concrete grasp of the deficiencies, failures, and humiliating limitations of their wounded nature. The liturgy does not indulge in extremist presentations that provide preachers with ready-made sermons in which the period before the Fall is described in language from the Arabian Nights while the ages after the Fall are uniformly black and catastrophic. The Church knows only too well, from long experience, that such contrasts arouse only a passing emotion and cannot lead to radical changes in the soul’s outlook. Something more is needed for a genuine conversion.

**Preoccupation with Paradise**

If the Church likes to tell us of the paradisal state (it is a frequent theme of the fathers), she does so not for the pleasure of reminding us of what we have lost but to remind us that we must return to that paradise. If we are to properly comprehend the whole paschal liturgy and its rich typology, and if we are to understand properly the spirit in which the Church will reread the account of paradise in Genesis to those about to be baptized during the Easter Vigil, we must begin now to enter into her mentality as she proclaims the story at the moment when she wishes us to begin to live, with her, the history of salvation. Paradise, in her way of thinking, is not so much a paradise that has been lost as it is a paradise we are to regain and, in fact, have already regained. In describing to us paradise when it was first cre-
ated, the Church already has in mind the words Christ will speak to the Good Thief while hanging on the cross: “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

This is a point we must insist on: The Church cannot read the narrative of creation and paradise to us without taking into account all that happened later on, any more than she can fail to remember at every moment what she is and where she comes from. She is herself both an image of paradise and the beginning of paradisal fulfillment. In an ancient text entitled *The Odes of Solomon*, which may have been used in liturgical celebrations, the splendor of that regained paradise, of which the Church is an image, is described in poetic terms. The text tells us that our paradise is now to be found in Christ:

> Eloquent water from the fountain of the Lord was given me to drink; I drank and was intoxicated by the living water that does not die. I abandoned the madness widespread on the earth, stripped it from me and cast it away. The Lord gave me his own new garment and clad me in his light. I drew glad breath in the pleasant breeze of the Lord. I adored the Lord because he is glorious, and I said: Happy they who have their roots in the earth and for whom there is a place in his paradise.⁶

The reader will recognize in the sentence “The Lord gave me his own new garment and clad me in his light” an allusion to the grace of baptism, which consists, according to St. Paul, in “clothing oneself in Christ.” And, in fact, it is baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ that fulfills the prophecy: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” The fathers vie with one another for developing the theme of the return to paradise through baptism. Similarly, a favorite motif in the mosaics that decorate the early baptisteries is the portrayal of paradise, whose running (“living”) waters symbolize baptism. The sheep drinking at the stream are the faithful who have been made one within the bosom of the Church, and among them walks Christ, the new Adam.

Everything said of Adam in the Genesis narratives must be carefully noted, since the fathers like to compare him with the new Adam as with his infinitely superior counterpart. The parallel between the two Adams, so dear, for example, to St. Irenaeus, leads in turn to a parallel between Eve and the new Eve, Mary, and between Eve and the Church. Thus, the birth of Eve from Adam’s side becomes the
image of the Church’s birth, as Spouse of Christ, from the side of the new Adam.

**Sin in the Light of Redemption**

Evidently the Church, in her reflection on sin, does not concentrate primarily on the Adam who fell but sees sin rather in the light of the redemption wrought by Christ. The Church here shows a healthy realism, for though she wants us to be fully aware of all that sin implies, she refuses to make sin the center of religion. The focus of Christianity is not on sin but on Christ who conquered sin and death. Consequently, in the theology of Lent, the promise of redemption is more important than sin. Christianity is not a dualist religion that sees the good and evil spirits locked in conflict; it is the religion of the God who overcomes all evil.

**Original Sin?**

For quite some time now, we have been uneasy with the concept of “original sin.” Our uneasiness has two causes: the concept of original sin seems to undermine our human dignity, and it seems to involve a basic injustice. The first thing the modern world does, therefore, when it turns its attention to Christianity, is to reject the idea of original sin. By so doing it involves itself in all sorts of misunderstandings about Christianity, but at least its attitude is an intelligible one. For there can be no doubt that the presentation of original sin has too often been morbid and that it is morbid at times even today. Few concepts have, in fact, been so distorted and ruined by countless misunderstandings as has the concept of original sin.

On the other hand, in order to repress the anxiety that the concept of original sin can arouse, people at times transform the Genesis narrative into a bedtime story for clever or naughty children. Once it is turned into a myth, it is much easier to reject the reality that has thus been cleverly hidden.

We do not intend to enter here into the thicket of theological discussion on original sin. After all, Christians who lack specialized training nonetheless have the right to an intelligent grasp of the essentials of a problem that affects them very deeply. Let us therefore leave aside the question of what elements each of the various sources
of Genesis 2–3 has contributed to the story. We may also leave aside the question of whether the “human” who sinned was an individual; even in the story itself, after all, two human beings sin!

Before proceeding, however, we should advert to the fact that the word “Adam” is not a proper name applied to a single person but signifies “human being,” in the sense of humankind or all humans. The Hebrew for “Adam” occurs 539 times, and in every case the translators are justified in translating it simply as “the human.” Ezekiel, for example, uses “Adam” several times, and the translation “human” is quite legitimate. Thus, Ezekiel 19:3, “a young lion he became; / He learned to tear apart prey, / he devoured people”; a more literal translation would be: “he devoured Adam.” The reader may also consult Ezekiel 20:11, 13, 21; 25:13; etc. (and see Gen 7:21; 9:5).

To repeat, we may leave this problem aside; for even if we maintain that a couple sinned, or even a multiplicity of couples, this creates no real difficulty. The important, and the more difficult, thing is to put our finger on the essential theology of Genesis 2–3. Adequate treatment would, of course, require a whole book. We can at least give a short synthesis, a series of points that can provide food for reflection and stir our interest in pursuing the question further, while supplying in the interim a sufficient foundation for our vital experience of the liturgical season we are here endeavoring to understand.

We noted earlier that what God creates is divine. This means that when he created a human, his only thought was to create a being that would eventually share in the divine nature. The only qualification to this is that God wanted this creature to share in the divine nature in a free and fully personal way. In other words, humans must freely accept such a participation and attain it along the lines set down by the Creator. There was to be nothing automatic in this creation of a divinized human being: humans must freely consent to divinization; they must assent to this divinized state and cooperate fully with it.

There can be no doubt, of course, that every gift is from God and that the whole work of divinization, like that of creation itself, depends entirely on him. The point we are emphasizing here is that when God created a human, he was not creating a mere thing; humans must cooperate in shaping their own being and in making themselves what they are meant to be in the divine plan: the image and likeness of God. When God created humans, he set participation in the divine nature before them as a goal, but he did not simply
impose it on them without their consent. This means that the possibility of failure is inherent in the plan of creation.

At the same time, we must remember that in God’s plan human beings were endowed with supernatural powers. Humans then lost these powers by refusing to act as God wished. But the Lord continues to invite us to live a life like his. That life is a possibility for us; it is not forced upon us, since a being compelled to be divine would really not be divine after all! The invitation and the possibility, however, are freely given by God, just as the grace to follow the invitation and to become “divine” is likewise God’s gift.

There was, then, a catastrophe at the beginning of human history. Humanity lost the gift of divinization that it had refused to accept, despite the clarity of mind and the strength of will with which people were then endowed. After that catastrophe, each human born, without being radically corrupt (as Luther maintained), would be born into a world that is sick in every respect: physically, physiologically, intellectually, and spiritually. Humans no longer possess sufficient strength to confront and master the world into which they are born. They must indeed grow and gradually achieve divinization or else reject it; yet, if left to their own resources, they are incapable of entering upon the true way that leads to divinization.

Every human depends on the human race, past and present, of which he or she is a part. The individual is not an isolated entity; every enrichment and every perversion of humanity is social in character. We do not inherit the personal guilt of our family ancestors, but we do inherit their defects. The inclination to evil is perennial; it precedes the present state of humanity. We cannot but admit that of all the beings that make up the world, humans alone have the power to destroy themselves, and “evil” consists in this self-destruction. Evil is the contrary of creation; it is opposed to creation, not as one being to another, but as negation. At the same time, however, this evil flows from the human will, and humans are responsible for it.

**Evil Today**

Here we have the permanent stumbling block: How is the existence of God, who is necessarily good and just, compatible with the evil in the world? Of what value have the long centuries of Christianity been?
In earlier times people were tempted to solve the basic problem by dualism: an ultimate source of evil alongside an ultimate source of good. Our contemporaries adopt a more radical solution: atheism. The existence of evil has, of course, always been regarded as the clinching argument against Christianity, but this is only because evil has been misunderstood.

Take, for example, death. According to a pagan vision of reality, death is evil supreme and unqualified. Consequently, the opposition between paganism and Christianity emerges most clearly at this point. For the Christian, death is not an annihilation of the person but only a stage or phase in the ongoing completion of the creation of humanity. Therefore, there is no contradiction between death and the goodness of God. On the contrary, we may even say that death is a manifestation of God’s goodness, inasmuch as he thereby continues his work of creation despite the resistance people offer.

The same can be said for all the failures and setbacks that mark one’s life. There is genuine “failure” only when we adopt the worldly perspective that makes “success” all-important. In the Christian vision, “success” can be measured only in relation to a final, future destiny. Evil, then, can also be defined only in terms of the definitive goal to which we are called.

Sin and Reparation

God is concerned about people, but if he is to divinize people, he must allow them the responsibility for their actions. Divinization is always the end that God has in view, but he gives us the means of freely attaining that end. This is the point of the Adam-Christ antithesis that is so favored a theme in the New Testament (Mark 1:13; Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22, 45-49).

We shall have occasion later on, in connection with the First Sunday of Lent, to attend to Mark 1:13, the temptation of Christ by Satan. The text clearly intends to contrast Christ, as head of a new human race, with the first Adam and to show Christ as overcoming where the first Adam succumbed. The parallelism also involves both Adam and Jesus being tempted by Satan. It is reasonable that the Adam-Christ parallel accounts for Luke’s tracing the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:38) and for his placing the genealogy immediately before his account of the temptation (4:1-13).
We are hereby invited to read Genesis with reparation and the new creation in mind. There is an air of triumph about the way St. Paul develops the contrast between Christ and Adam. We can sense it in Romans 5:12-21, which comprises the second reading for the First Sunday of Lent (Year A). Where sin abounded, grace has abounded still more. Adam was a figure of him who was to come (Rom 5:14), that is, of the Christ who has bestowed life-giving grace on all humanity (Rom 5:15). Grace is universal in its compass, so that wherever death laid its hand, there shall be resurrection (1 Cor 15:22), and those who rise to eternal life will have a body that is glorious and incorruptible (1 Cor 15:44-49). At that point we will lay aside our likeness to the mortal, corruptible Adam and acquire the likeness to Christ and his spiritual body.

St. Paul here cites Genesis 2:7 in the Septuagint version: “The first man, Adam, became a living being,” and then he draws his parallel: “the last Adam a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). In our material, earthly bodies we resemble the first Adam; in our glorious, heavenly bodies we shall resemble the last Adam (see 1 Cor 15:48).

The Optimism of Lent

Lent, then, offers us an optimistic vision of the world; for though it sees the world as sinful because of humanity’s beginnings, it always links sin to redemption, and the destruction of the world to its renewal.

To those not yet converted, Lent offers entry into the new creation through baptism. To those already baptized, it proposes a reformation of life and thus an advance toward the divinization that is already theirs in principle but that they must make truly their own in an ever more conscious and radical way.

Sincerity and Honesty

Lent thus summons us to something more than an artificial asceticism or a set of supplementary observances. It asks of all people that they have the courage sincerely and honestly to reform their lives and to judge where they are, what they are seeking, and how much they have really understood of Christian life. These forty days lived
with Israel in the desert, with Moses, with Elijah, and above all with Christ are a time of deep spiritual significance.

We all know that we must face temptation. We all know too that we are capable of overcoming with Christ. The question is, do we sincerely and honestly want to overcome? The fact that we are capable of overcoming does not do away with our inherent weakness or with the various physiological and psychological influences at work in us. It does mean, however, that we are not tempted beyond our strength.

There is, then, a sense of risk but also an optimism because we are assured of victory, provided we use the means Christ offers us. For the person preparing for baptism, Lent is a time for the deliberate acquisition of these means. For those who are already Christians, it is a time for learning anew how to use the means wisely and to develop or renew them. In short, Lent is a time when we are to collaborate with God in creating something divine.