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FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., DIRECTOR

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON LENT

About twenty years ago a friend of mine was Director of Religious Education at a parish in San Francisco. She said her pastor wanted to cover the Stations of the Cross during Advent and Christmas because they were so sad. She asked what I thought of the idea, and I said, "Not much, actually. Bethlehem is only a rest stop on the way to Calvary."

And without Calvary, Bethlehem makes little sense – or little difference. Jesus did not take on our flesh so he could lay it down, but so he could offer it up — on the cross. And to make that just a little easier for us to bear, we have Mary to share the events of Calvary with us.

The cross is the paradox of our faith, an instrument of shame that becomes the key to our salvation. And at the foot of the cross is Mary, weeping. We find the explanation for these tears in a little-discussed aspect of our spirituality called "abandonment." The most perfect example of abandonment is Jesus, in the Garden, the night before his death. Jesus was not subject to the internal temptations to sin we are, but he was tempted, and in the last Century two of my Dominican confreres, reflecting on Christ's temptation, observed

He wanted to feel it. He deliberately allowed His flesh to recoil from the pain of the Passion in order to taste the full bitterness of His chalice. Similarly we are to suppose that He willed to experience to the full all the suffering involved in the ordeal of temptation so as to be as close as possible to all His fellowmen.

Does anyone look forward to Lent? Probably not. The human Jesus could not have looked forward to the suffering and pain of Gethsemane and Calvary, but he saw them as the price Mercy demanded for our salvation.

In his encyclical letter on the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis urges the Church to embrace the days of Lent as a "privileged moment" to experience God's mercy more deeply. He directs our attention to the prophets, whose appeal is always to our hearts: "You, O Lord, are a God who...pardons sin...pleased to show mercy... You will trample down our sins and toss them into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:18) And because Baptism unites us



Silhouette by Sr. Jean Dorcy, O.P.

with one another in the Body of Christ, our Holy Father calls us to share what we have received. The prophet Isaiah, Pope Francis writes, "can be meditated upon concretely during this season of prayer, fasting and works of charity: 'Is not this the fast that I choose...to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry...and not hide yourself from your own flesh?'" (Is 58: 6)

If we infer – correctly – that God is apt to invite us to experience our own Gethsemane, then we must be grateful we have Jesus and Mary who have made the journey before us. These moments, though, should not be moments of despair, but rather of revelation. Wherever we find the Garden or the Cross, there we will find ourselves.

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TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

THE CAPITAL SINS: I

PRIDE

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

Our recent reflections have considered God's commandments, as well as the immense gift He has extended to us in this Jubilee Year of Mercy. Our consideration of the commandments led us to reflect upon some specific actions which promote or obstruct our progress on the way to God's kingdom; our thoughts on the Year of Mercy led us to rejoice in the forgiveness God extends to us.

THE NATURE OF SIN

These reflections took for granted our experience of sin, but did not consider the nature of sin itself. Our next series of reflections will discuss sin, and particularly the "capital" sins, which are the root of the wrong-doing that is so sad a part of our human life.

Our *Catechism* provides a very succinct definition of sin, identifying it as

An offense against reason, truth and right conscience; it is a failure in genuine love of God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods... (CCC, No. 1849)

THOUGHTS, WORDS, DEEDS

St. Thomas Aquinas calls sin, "*An utterance, a deed or a desire contrary to the eternal law.*" (ST I-II, 71:6) These words undoubtedly sound familiar. In the *Confiteor* at Mass we accuse ourselves of these very "thoughts, words, deeds, and omissions" that weaken our relations with God and one another, through our choosing what we perceive to be our own good rather than the path God has ordained. St. Augustine calls this "*love of oneself even to contempt of God,*" and it weakens not only the loving bonds that should unite us to God, but those that join us to our fellow-Christians by means of our Baptism into the Body of Christ. As the *Catechism* observes, "*Love of neighbor is inseparable from love for God.*" (CCC, No. 1878) Whatever threatens one love threatens the other.

CAPITAL SINS: PRIDE

St. Gregory the Great identified seven sins he named "capital" – or "chief" – because they are wrong in themselves, and lead to other sins. They are pride, avarice (greed), envy, anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth (coldness of heart). We shall consider each in turn.

In his *Rule* for members of religious communities, St. Augustine observes, "*every other kind of sin has to do with the commission of evil deeds, whereas pride lurks even in good works in order to destroy them.*"

What Augustine wants us to understand by this remark is pride's capacity to lure us into taking more pleasure than we ought, or seeking more credit than we deserve, when we do something good.

The Latin word for pride is *superbia*, and the "super-" which forms the first part of the word tells us a great deal about the sin. It means "above," and describes how pride leads us to seek that which is above us. Not in the sense that we strive for excellence, but that we wish to be more than God has created us to be. St. Thomas writes, "*...right reason requires that every man's will should tend to that which is proportionate to him... pride denotes something opposed to right reason...*" (ST, II-II, 162.1)

THE EXCESS OF PRIDE

God calls us to excel in everything we do, and provides grace to strengthen us on our spiritual journey. But the desire to be more than we are – what Augustine calls "*the desire for inordinate exaltation*" – isolates us, separating us from the God who created us, and from those with whom God intends us to share His creation. St. Thomas Aquinas states pride is unique among sins because "*in other sins man turns away from God, either through ignorance or through weakness... whereas pride denotes aversion from God simply through being unwilling to be subject to God and His rule.*" (ST, II-II, 162.7)

Ultimately, the desire to put ourselves first lies at the heart of pride. It renders us incapable of accepting God's dominion, and it also hampers our ability to interact with others. Thus, Thomas Aquinas observes,

Pride is always contrary to the love of God, inasmuch as the proud man does not subject himself to the divine rule. Sometimes it is also contrary to the love of our neighbor; when, namely, a man also sets himself inordinately above his neighbor; and this again is a transgression of the Divine rule, which has established order among men, so that one ought to be subject to another. (ST, II-II, 162.5)

THE CONSEQUENCE: ISOLATION

We may not wonder, then, that when Dante makes his journey through hell in the *Inferno* of *The Divine Comedy*, he encounters individuals guilty of pride in the very lowest circle, encased in ice, unable to move. Their punishment is an apt illustration of the coldness of heart that characterized their dealings on earth, in which they turned more and more upon themselves,

shunning God and finding increasingly less solace in the company of others.

If we spend any time reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we will repeatedly find references to the community our Baptism calls us to share with one another, and with the Blessed Trinity. Sin lays siege to that community, and pride is our community's special foe because it seduces us into imagining we have no need for anyone, or anything, beyond ourselves. St. Gregory the Great wrote very poetically, but nonetheless seriously, when he observed

Pride, the queen of vices, when it has vanquished the heart, forthwith delivers it into the hands of its lieutenants, the seven principal vices, that they may despoil it and produce vices of all kinds.

THE FIRST VICTIMS

Let us turn now to the first victims of pride, the first to embrace its false allure. These are, of course, the angels and our First Parents. From them we have all inherited the tendency to promote ourselves, and our causes, above all others. From them, too, we have discovered the sad consequences of such actions.

Our Scripture does not mention the creation of the angels, and the early Church Fathers are divided in their opinion on when God created them. Gregory Nazianzen taught that the angels were the first acts of God's creation. Gregory is the only one of the Fathers no one ever contradicted, so this gives his opinion a certain weight, but Thomas Aquinas politely suggests an alternative hypothesis – that angels were created at the same time as every other creature. The reason, he argues, is that angels are a part of creation, and no part of a whole is perfect if it stands alone.

PRIDE AND THE ANGELS

As we have seen, St. Thomas argues that sin is a deliberate turning away from the rectitude or rightness an act ought to have. Because all rational creatures have free will, any rational creature, unless protected by a special grace, can sin. Angels do not have bodies, so a number of sins we can commit are not within their grasp. However, two of them are – pride and envy. Pride, as we have seen, because it is the choice not to submit to a superior when submission is due, and envy (as we shall see) because it grieves at *another's* good fortune, which it views as a barrier to its own.

St. Thomas teaches that the Devil's sin was, unquestionably a sin of pride, seeking to be like God. Not in equality, which he would have immediately realized was impossible. But he sought to be like God in self-sufficiency. He wanted to be subject to no one, and he wanted to dominate over others.

PRIDE AND OUR FIRST PARENTS

This, St. Thomas teaches, was the sin the Devil tempted our First Parents to commit. And here might be a good place to consider how the devil tempts us. Scholars suggest we begin our study with the word "devil"

itself, which comes from the Greek word "*diabolos*." It means "to accuse" or "calumniate," and this is the devil's chief occupation – to detract or lie about God. St. Paul employs the word quite carefully in his letters, in part to remind us whose company we find ourselves in if we lie – and especially if we defame another's character.

The Father of Lies began his career in the Garden, suggesting to Eve the reason God forbade her and Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge was jealousy. He tried the same tactic on Jesus in the desert, suggesting God did not value Jesus at his true worth, while he – the Devil – would give him everything if only Jesus would bow down and worship.

This, however, is to get ahead of ourselves. St. Thomas teaches that the First Man was created in a state of innocence. Therefore, he could not have sinned by desiring some physical or sensual pleasure, simply because he was unaware he did not already enjoy all such things. Nor would he have imagined the possibility of possessing some spiritual good other than those God had already allotted him.

HUMANITY BEFORE THE FALL

In the Garden, our First Parents' spirit was wholly subject to God, with the result that they experienced no conflict between body and his spirit. Human flesh was so (happily) subject to the human soul that it was not moved by passion. Nor was the body subject to illness or death. Sin, as we know, overturned that harmony. What the Devil presented to Adam and Eve was the possibility of gaining a spiritual good beyond those God had given. St. Thomas explains

It remains therefore that the first inordinateness of the human appetite resulted from his coveting inordinately some spiritual good. Now he would not have coveted it inordinately, by desiring it according to his measure as established by the Divine rule. Hence it follows that man's first sin consisted in his coveting some spiritual good above his measure; and this pertains to pride. Therefore it is evident that man's first sin was pride. (*ST*, II-II, 163, 1)

We have said that to imitate God is the source of virtue and growth in our spiritual life, because such imitation spurs us to embrace the qualities God has shared with us. We have been created in God's image and likeness; if we look like God, we ought to act like Him – according to our nature. Imitation becomes sinful when we seek to possess divine qualities that belong to God alone.

THE LURE OF PRIDE

Here is where our First Parents fell prey to the Devil's lure. He suggested they might, by their own power, obtain "knowledge of good and evil," and determine – without reference to God's will – what was proper to do or avoid. We mentioned earlier St. Augustine's remarking sin is "*love of oneself even to contempt of God*." When St. Thomas considers the fall of the Devil, and the subsequent fall of our First Parents, he adds they all "*coveted somewhat to be equal to God, in so*

far as each wished to rely on himself in contempt of the Divine rule.” (ST, II-II, 163, 2)

If we ask which of the angels sinned, Aquinas replies that charity is incompatible with sin because its fire of love can only lead one to God. Knowledge, on the other hand, is capable of leading individuals into any number of follies. (ST, I, 63, 7. *ad 1*) Therefore, he concludes, the angels who sinned were Cherubs, angels of the intellect.

Moreover, he adds, the highest angel who sinned was the highest angel of all. The reason for this is the connection between pride and excellence. We remarked earlier St. Augustine’s teaching that pride is taking inordinate pleasure in doing something good. Aquinas bases his conclusion on the logic of the early Church Fathers, who argued that the most splendid of the angels could not be content with second place. (ST, I, 63, 7)

Are the demons sorry for their sin? The answer to this question is yes and no. To be sorry for sin is a sign of the goodness of the will. Once God has rendered judgment, it is too late for the will to express remorse for sin. On the other hand, the demons certainly lament the punishment they are forced to endure, for every will naturally desires happiness, and the very notion of punishment is repugnant to the will. They also envy the good fortune of those who do not suffer as they do. So, they may bewail their punishment, but they cannot express sorrow for the sin that merited it.

TEMPTATION

We should say, now, a word now about temptation. And the point to make is that temptation comes in two forms – from inside, and from outside. Temptation from within is both the result of our own, personal past wrongdoing, and, as the *Catechism* reminds us, it is a disposition that is one of the consequences of Original Sin. (CCC, No. 405)

Often refusing to acknowledge God as his source, man has...upset the relationship which should link him to his last end; and at the same time he has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other men and all creatures (CCC, No. 401)

THE RESULT OF THE FALL

For the soul to turn against God was a catastrophe; so were the consequences that our First Parents did not immediately see. Once the soul was no longer a mediating force between God and the human body, human flesh turned against the soul. The result was death, infirmity, and the ongoing struggle between the soul and the senses that is a common – and sad – fact of our human experience. St. Paul eloquently sums up the case when he writes, “*I behold another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind*” (Rom 7:23) and “*the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh*” (Gal. 5:17).

St. Augustine echoed St. Paul (and anticipated St. Thomas Aquinas) when he wrote

...it is thoroughly in accord with both our faith and hope, that we are to take heaven and earth in the sense of spirit and flesh... let the will of God be done on earth. as it is in heaven; i.e., in such a way that... as the spirit does not resist God, but follows and does His will, so the body may also not resist the...soul, which at present is harassed by the weakness of the body, and is prone to fleshly habit.

THE PROMISE OF TRIUMPH

Scripture assures us the spiritual warfare that characterizes the moral life of Christians will result in God’s triumph, a triumph we will share when our bodies and souls are united in heaven, at the end of time. In the resurrection of the body, the earth of human flesh will once again embrace the heaven of the human spirit.

MARY, MOTHER OF HUMILITY

The preacher of this Good News is the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin, who tells us the remedy for pride and its consequences is humility. Our theology teaches that humility is acknowledging God as the source of everything we have and everything we are.

If we look at the verbs in the *Magnificat*, we see they are all in the past tense, which might seem a little presumptuous, considering how little time had passed since the angel’s visit to Mary and her visit to Elizabeth. But Mary represents all that was best in the Old Testament, which had no doubt that God had lifted up the lowly and cast the mighty from their thrones – the very qualities the sin of pride denies.

When God punished our pre-historic ancestors for their pride, the Book of Genesis tells us he confused their speech. Three or four thousand years later, when the poet Dryden wished to characterize our later ancestors in the Old Testament, he used an adjective for noise to describe their decadence: “God’s *murmurous* people, whom, debauched with ease, no king could govern, nor no God could please.” In both cases, a Babel of noises, competing for attention, and demanding to be heard.

THE VALUE OF SURRENDER

For just a moment, compare this hell of noise to every picture we have ever seen of the Annunciation. No crowds, no voices raised, no noise at all, really. Just two individuals, facing one another and carrying on a conversation that will change the course of history.

*Salvation to all that will is nigh;
That All...Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
So, faithful Virgin, yields himself to lie...
Immensity, cloistered in thy dear womb.*

What a wealth that word “cloistered” conjures up – the calm and tidy world presided over by Mary, where nothing goes to waste, and every single word and action bears fruit because instead of calculating the worth of our own thoughts, words and deeds, the only voice we hear is God’s, and the only word we say is “yes.”