

## THE FORBIDDEN TREE

And the Lord God commanded the man,  
"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;  
but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge  
of good and evil,  
for when you eat of it you will surely die."

-Gen 2:16-17

Among the unmistakable signs of communication that exist between a man and his Maker is the moral imperative seated in the depths of the human conscience. There is no equivalent to this voice anywhere in nature beyond the bounds of the human psyche, yet so pervasive and inescapable is its claim that to ignore it is to court disaster and insanity. While the voice of conscience defies the objectification of "pure reason," it nevertheless transcends solipsism in that it is founded on relationships between subjects, subjects who by virtue of their freedom to communicate are also free to choose and to respond arbitrarily to conscience. Just as the laws of nature provide a grammar for communication of a sort between subjects, so do the categorical imperatives of conscience govern the inarticulate moral discourse that exists even in the most primitive of human societies. It is tempting to think that this moral law relates to no more than the preferences and taboos of a particular culture, were it not for the universal consciousness of moral failure that we refer to as guilt. If conscience were no more than the result of conformity to a common set of expectations, then man would know no more than an animal fear of censure and punishment. The existence of guilt, however, speaks of a moral standard predicated on a transcendent relationship with a Divine Being. The failure of created being to correspond entirely to the Logos as reflected in the moral order leads to the recognition of a Divine Subject and His voice within the human conscience. With this recognition comes an instinctive fear, a fear that goes beyond the mere anticipation of retribution and punishment. It is the fear of death.

The human fear of death is rooted in the perception that what is true in an ultimate sense must endure, and consequently that which is not true cannot. God alone, who is Truth, is eternal. Man in his rebellion against his Maker sought his own "truth", to which the author of Genesis refers as the knowledge of good and evil. The illusion of self-defined truth born of the original act of solipsism has not obscured the fact of human mortality, and therefore the knowledge that this man-made truth is perishable. This lack of dependability in the human order which is the fruit of man's declaration of independence leads in turn to an all-pervading mistrust. Primeval mistrust is the germ that inhibits and destroys all communication and ultimately life itself.

Mistrust has bred all the sins that mankind has ever known. Mistrust of God has led man to seek disappointing idols which deceive him with their suggestion of durability and trustworthiness, but which sooner or later let him down as they reveal their true nature. The allurements of such idols not only breed irreverence and contempt for God; they also drive man to frenetic activity that distracts him from the thought of death and that acts as a substitute for the life and rest that can only be found in God. The severe and total disappointment engendered by idols in turn leads to disrespect for and rebellion against all authority, alienating children from parents, citizens from their leaders, and

nations from the rule of law. Disappointment breeds anger, and anger breeds violence and contempt for life. Contempt for life not only encourages murder but even affects the means by which life is generated, thus sowing the seeds of infidelity in human relationships. Furthermore, mistrust and disappointment persuade man to believe that he does not have enough to sustain him and that he deserves more, often at the expense of others. They lead him to steal not only material objects but also the good reputation of those he envies and make untrustworthiness a characteristic of his speech.

The effects of man's original sin were not confined to his relationship with God and with his neighbor. Altered too was his relationship with the material universe. Whereas previously, the universe and all in it served to mediate the communicative presence of God with man as did the fabled breeze in the Garden of Eden, it was now hostile and indifferent, a thing to be conquered and dominated in order to serve man. Fear and mistrust governed man's dealings with the animals, whereas the earth yielded thorns and thistles, rather than life-giving food. We can only imagine what nature looked like when impregnated with God's presence as it had been prior to the Fall. Today, only the sacraments remain as reminders of the supernatural value hidden in material things. Meanwhile, nature rebels at the artificial order imposed by man's self-ingenuity, which has disrupted the consistency of the divine creation.

The ultimate consequence of the Fall lay in man's very being, which became incongruous to the Logos. God's initial revelation in human history culminated in the giving of the Law of Sinai as a reminder to the human race of how far it had fallen in relation to its original position as the bearer of the divine self-image. This however was only a partial solution, for it only called man's attention to the fact of sin, but did not give him power over it. Being and Logos were yet to be reconciled in the human person.

God's final solution to the problem of sin was to regenerate all of creation in a second Adam. This new Adam is His very own eternally begotten Son whom we know as Jesus, the Anointed One (i.e., the Messiah or Christ). Jesus is the name we associate with the human aspect of the Divine Logos, in Whom everything in the universe was originally created. One of the deepest mysteries in the Christian faith is that the entire universe has now been totally renewed in the person of Christ:

For by him all things were created...He is before all things,  
and in him all things hold together...For God was pleased to have all his  
fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things...  
by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

-Col 1: 16-20

The experience of this new creation, however, depends on the transmission by supernatural faith (i.e., the very opposite of the fundamental mistrust which the original sin engendered) of the spiritual germ that is mysteriously hidden in the life of Christ. This life, which we know as the grace of God, must be received by God's spiritual children among the human race through the sacraments, beginning with Baptism and ultimately through the Eucharist, and by faith in the omnipotent Word of God. Only when the mystery of God's Kingdom among men is fully revealed will the mystery of the renewed Creation be finally and totally apparent. As St. Paul intimates,

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subject to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

-Rom 8: 19-21

The necessity of faith in bringing about the new creation lies in the desire of God to include man as co-creator of His universe based on a dialogue of love initiated by God but completed by man's humble "Amen!" It is in man's acknowledgement and grateful acceptance of God's Word that the mysterious power of faith is unleashed. The author of Hebrews defines faith as "the *substance* of things hoped for, the certainty of what is yet unseen (Heb 11: 1)." This mysterious substance is, marvelously enough, the fruit of a trusting acquiescence in what lies beyond the bounds of human reasoning and power. It is this substance that is unknowingly laid in the trusting prayers of the children of God, as the foundation of a new order that will endure forever.

**--Eduardo P. Olaguer**