

# The Human Condition Before the Fall: Man as the Object of God's Paternal and Providential Care

**MARCO VANZINI**

Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Roma  
vanzini@pusc.it  
ORCID: 0009-0007-3137-9454

**Abstract.** This paper examines some theological reinterpretations of the dogma on the fall and the original condition of man before sin and formulates a proposal that, in accordance with St. Thomas Aquinas' view, sees in man's originally holy relationship (original holiness) with God the 'context' for the exercise of God's providential and paternal care for man, which would have protected him from natural evils. It is then shown that the 'physical-bodily normality' of the progenitors in such a relational context accords well with both the current scientific understanding of the world and the fundamental theological reasons of dogma.

**Keywords:** Original justice, Providence, Physical Evil, Scientific Vision, Aquinas.

## Introduction

In the face of advances in physical, biological, and paleo-anthropological sciences that shed light on human origins, it has become necessary to reconsider the fundamental significance of faith formulations concerning the creation of man and original sin. The topic of man's *original condition* is among the most difficult and at the same time delicate to address.

In fact, if one does not want to attribute responsibility to God for having created man in a condition that is itself subject to physical evil, one must maintain the conviction that before original sin the human condition was free from the burden of suffering and death.

This is precisely, from the very beginnings of the doctrine of faith on original sin, one of the main reasons for the dogma's existence, together with the affirmation of the universality of the redemption worked by Christ (which presupposes the universality of sin). The Church's doctrine on original sin was developed initially in confrontation with Gnostic-type currents that attributed the origin of evil to God. This doctrine held the fundamental truth that God is pure goodness and that evil in creation is not attributable to Him but to an abuse of freedom by spiritual creatures (cf. Rondet 1971, 43, 45, 46, 51, 55–57; Olmi 2008, 53–85). For the purposes of this paper, let us specify that we intend to refer not to the whole issue of so-called 'evil' represented by the suffering of non-rational creatures or necessary to evolution but only to the physical evil experienced by man.

The original condition of man as free from suffering and death is not an outdated trace of patristic doctrine. It was reaffirmed in the Middle Ages, dogmatically sanctioned by the Council of Trent, and reaffirmed by the recent Magisterium. Principal references are found in: Pius XII's Encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950), the Second Vatican Council's Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) nos. 13, 18, 22, Paul VI's *Motu Proprio Credo of the People of God* (1968), John Paul II's Catechesis on Creation (cf. especially *General Audience*, 8 October 1986), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) nos. 399–400, 403–405, Benedict XVI's Catechesis on Original Sin and Creation (*General Audience*, 3 December 2008; 6 February 2013), Pope Francis' teachings in: the *General Audience* of 16 September 2015 and the *Angelus* of 10 January 2016 (cf. also the reference to original sin in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015), no. 66).

In the face of modern scientific knowledge about human origins, this doctrine appears to many to be difficult to sustain. The sciences clearly show that man appeared in a world already subject to physical and biological laws that made physical suffering and death inevitable for every natural organism, including man. In what sense then can we say that man's

suffering and death are a consequence of the fall, that they 'appeared' as a result of original sin?

In our study, we will examine some of the theological proposals that have addressed the challenges posed by the current scientific vision; then, with particular reference to the theology of St Thomas, we will outline a proposal that seems to us to better integrate the fundamental instances of faith with those of science. What we will say is, in essence, independent of the position adopted regarding the monogenism or polygenism hypotheses regarding human origins, although our preference goes to the monogenist hypothesis because it is still more satisfactory from a theological point of view and not incompatible with the modern scientific view (two examples of recent proposals defending such compatibility are Swamidass 2019 and Craig 2021; for an overview of the recent theological-scientific debate on evolution and the fall, see Madueme and Reeves 2014; Cavanaugh and Smith 2017).

## 1. Recent theological positions on original sin

Since the 1950s and 1960s, after the neo-scholastic season, attempts to revise the theology of original sin have flourished. The majority of theologians appeared convinced that the doctrine needed to be revised, valuing the modern (especially scientific) understanding of the world and critically re-examining the biblical and dogmatic datum. Flick and Alszeghy (1972) offer a review of the main positions developed at that time. A subsequent *status quaestionis* by Wiedenhofer (1991), distinguishes different paradigms of reinterpretation of the original sin doctrine: theological (original sin as human solidarity in sin); sociological (social sin); feminist (sin as a product of patriarchy-masculinism); psychological (original sin as anguish); cosmological-metaphysical (original sin as a necessary aspect of an evolving universe). Brambilla (2004) notes that in recent years the emphasis has shifted to the 'primacy of solidarity in Christ', with a 'displacement of original sin theology from the perspective of originating original sin to the perspective of originated original sin (*ibid.*, 325–326)'. The same author proposes a profound theological-anthropo-

logical reading of original sin as an act of ‘self-soteria’ – in which the whole of humanity is in solidarity (complicit) with Adam – that is, as a refusal of the predestination to filial relationship with God in Christ. The emphasis on the essential lack of ‘filiality’ in the relationship with God is also highlighted by Rossetti (2012) as one of the main dimensions of original sin.

Alongside a notable development in the theology of *originating original sin*, one finds in many theological proposals a lack of reflection on the original condition and in particular on the origin of the physical evil experienced by man. Rossetti himself notes that ‘the actual status of *originating original sin* remains an open question’ and that Adam’s singular freedom ‘at once consistent and limited, (his *posse non peccare*) as well as his “immortality” (*posse non mori*) are realities unimaginable to us’ (*ibid.*, 400–401). This lack of reflection seems, at least in part, to be an effect of the effort of critical reinterpretation of the biblical and dogmatic datum which is typical of the various proposals. Undoubtedly, the confrontation with the scientific view of human origins imposes particularly stringent rationality requirements on theological discourse, but this does not mean that any attempt to think of an original condition more in line with the biblical datum and the interpretation of Tradition and the Magisterium necessarily has a mythical flavour or betrays naivety with respect to the scientific worldview. We intend to illustrate the need for a better theological approach to the original condition of man, in dialogue with the sciences, by taking a closer look at the proposals of K. Rahner, M. Flick and Z. Alszeghy and G. Tanzella-Nitti.

### 1.1. Karl Rahner: the problem of death in the original condition

In his essay *Natural Science and Reasonable Faith* (Rahner 1988), Karl Rahner addresses the problem of how we can ‘understand the teaching of theology that death, the wages of sin, stands at the beginning of the history of humanity’, since ‘biological death would have existed *before* the emergence of humankind’ and ‘there is no place here for a consideration of sin as the cause of death unless one postulates a miraculous intervention of God who has prepared a paradise for humankind, something which,

honestly speaking, is not compatible with the findings of palaeontology' (*ibid.*, 46). A few years earlier he had expressed a less clear-cut opinion regarding the impossibility of thinking about an original condition (earthly paradise) other than man's present situation (cf. Rahner 1978, 115). In any case, the German theologian argues that death is required for primarily theological rather than biological reasons, in the sense that it is the necessary definitive 'fulfilment' of the history of man's freedom and, as such, would have been the end of life in the earthly paradise anyway (Rahner 1988, 47; cf. Rahner 1978, 115). Therefore, the fact that death is conceived with St Paul as the 'wages of sin' must necessarily be understood as 'a certain mode of dying', a mode marked existentially by suffering, different from that which man would have experienced without sin (Rahner 1988, 46–47; cf. Rahner 1978, 115). From the perspective of Scriptural hermeneutics, Rahner argues that it does not offer a 'historical account' and that 'the portrayal of the sin of the first man is rather an aetiological inference from the experience of man's existentiell situation in the history of salvation to what must have happened "at the beginning"', hence nothing more can be derived from it (Rahner 1978, 114).

Rahner's proposed solution to the question of death leaves one query unanswered: how can one understand death that comes as a tragic accident violently befalling a life, perhaps a young and innocent one, as a result of blind forces of nature? How could one see in such a way of dying a 'fulfilment of the history of freedom', even in light of man's deep trusting bond with God such as existed before sin? Quite different is to see that kind of death, together with Tradition, as a consequence of sin that God tolerates and in which for now – in earthly history – he sustains and accompanies man in his Son, made man and crucified, to overcome it – at the end of time – for all of us, by the power of the Spirit of the Risen One. Rahner is undoubtedly right in saying that a guilt-free structure of existence 'we have to postulate if we do not want to shift the blame for our sinfulness and for the co-determination of our situation by sin onto God' (Rahner 1978, 115). This, as we have recalled, is one of the two underlying motives of the original sin doctrine: to affirm the goodness of the Creator and his creation. But Rahner seems to refer only to the absence of sin

and guilt, that is of man's spiritual disorder, and not to the absence of suffering and death. It seems to us, instead, that in the original 'structure of existence' the possibility for man to 'be able not to suffer' and 'be able not to die' (cf. John Paul II 1986) due to blind forces of nature must also be postulated. Indeed, if death were possible in its natural dimension, even in the form of a violent and tragic end, it is not possible to understand it as part of a good order willed by the Creator: such a condition could not be qualified as 'very good' for man (cf. *Gen* 1).

### **1.2. Flick and Alszeghy: original sin as frustration of a virtuality**

In their book on original sin (Flick and Alszeghy 1972), the two Jesuit theologians propose a new understanding of the fall, whose 'historicity' they argue if one wants to avoid 'placing the cause of man's 'evil heart' in God himself' (ibid., 305). They hypothesise that, having reached the human level in the course of evolution, mankind had the possibility of freely choosing between good and evil. Mankind would thus have had to make 'a "leap" specifically different from those that had taken place previously' since it was a matter of reaching 'a perfection [...] that divinises man, surpasses the whole creaturely order' (ibid., 308). But here the rejection took place. Humanity placed itself at odds with God's creative will, causing sin to spread throughout the world and bringing evolution to a halt. A halt that was not outwardly visible but which drastically changed the course of human history: 'if the offer of supernatural life in its original form had been accepted, humanity would have arrived at a very different perfection: from birth in possession of the life of grace, men would have dominated with the perfect development of the person all the dynamism of nature, they would have tamed suffering, and they would have passed from the earthly stage of their existence to the definitive stage, without having to undergo that experience of 'rupture' that is death as we know it' (ibid., 308–309). As a consequence of this change, the divine plan to raise man to participation in the life of the Trinity took another course; now it must take place 'in the sign of the Paschal Mystery: one arrives at the supernatural through the merits of the Incarnate Word and through insertion in the Incarnate Word' (ibid., 309).

As the two theologians note, their hypothesis differs 'from the usual theology' especially 'in the conception of the state of original justice; the hypothesis in fact does not admit that a man lived on earth in a state of grace, integrity, and immortality' (ibid., 311). However, explicitly distancing themselves from Teilhard de Chardin, they deny that humanity's current miseries (moral but also natural: suffering and death) are an inevitable phenomenon of evolution, as this would contradict the fundamental teaching of Gen 2–3. Rather, the original catastrophe entailed a real loss of the goods of original righteousness that, although they did not exist in an actual way, nevertheless existed 'virtually' (ibid., 312). Original sin caused a radical change (fall, catastrophe) in human history: a change consisting not in the loss of goods already possessed, but in the frustration of a virtuality.

The two authors' hypothesis is remarkable. It has the merit of emphasising the fact that not only moral disorder but also physical evil cannot be attributed to God, not even as a necessary corollary of the decision to create an evolving, non-static world. However, two points can be made regarding the claim that an original state of holiness and justice was never experienced by man, given his decision to reject the divine offer: 1) this is not the tenor of biblical and magisterial statements, which regard the original state as an initially experienced and not merely possible situation, from which man has fallen; 2) in any case, the challenge remains to at least try to conceive how a different existence of man could have unfolded: an existence untouched by the blind evil produced by nature – including violent, unexpected death, which absurdly breaks lives and relationships – as well as that caused by men. If such a state is not even remotely imaginable, in the light of current historical, physical, and biological knowledge, then the theological assertion of its possibility remains suspended in the void.

### **1.3. Tanzella-Nitti: a comparison with scientific data**

The perspective of G. Tanzella-Nitti is that of Fundamental Theology in the context of the scientific worldview. Regarding human origins, he confronts positions that deny significance to the main dogmatic truths,

showing that, on closer inspection, the scientist has no apodictic data contrary to the most essential content of Revelation (Tanzella-Nitti 2015, 645–656). Concerning original sin, he argues: ‘In the context of a scientific examination of the origins of man, the narrative of Scripture about the moral test sustained by the progenitors and the consequences it generated [...] does not lose its significance’ (ibid., 652).

An important statement concerns the consequences of original sin and, indirectly, the *original condition* of the progenitors: *the effects of Adam’s fall cannot be imagined as a change in the laws of nature*. On this point the scientific evidence is indeed strong: natural laws have certainly not changed – as a result of man’s sin – for the cosmos as a whole, nor for the structure of matter with its physical dynamics, or for the biology of living beings. Tanzella-Nitti therefore decisively emphasises the ‘relational’ character of the consequences of sin: ‘Presenting the consequences of original sin, as these are transmitted to us by Revelation, it is therefore on the relational aspects that the interlocutor’s attention must be directed. Since man’s *founding relationship* is precisely that with God, when this is distorted because of sin, all other relationships are also distorted: man’s relationship with himself, the relationship between man and woman, between man and his fellows, between man and the rest of creation’ (ibid., 653). In this, the author shows himself in full agreement with what J. Ratzinger (2006, 83–105) also argues (cf. Sanz Sánchez 2018, 453–454).

## 2. The original condition in the light of St Thomas’ thought

We intend to show that a theological conception of the original condition that is compatible with the scientific data currently in our possession is possible, without having to renounce the theological data unanimously proposed by Tradition and affirmed by the Magisterium. Magisterial teaching reflects and confirms the traditional doctrine regarding an original condition of the progenitors characterised not only by *holiness* (being in grace) but also by *original justice* (cf. for instance Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992, nos. 399–400; 404–405): the latter indicates man’s right relationship with God and with creatures, as well as the har-



mony within man himself, between the spiritual and somatic dimensions and, as a consequence of this order, also 'being free from many sufferings, at least in the sense of a possibility of exemption from them: "posse non pati", as well as exemption from death, in the sense of "posse non mori"' (John Paul II, 1986; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992, n. 400). Thus, leaning also on the vision of St Thomas, in many aspects enlightening and topical, we can conceive of the original state of the progenitors in the following way.

### 2.1. The psychosomatic harmony of the person

Regarding the harmony of the person in its psychosomatic components (the gift of *integritas* in classical terms), the idea that man, in the profound unity of soul and body that characterised him, could originally experience a greater harmony between the spiritual and sensitive faculties – as an effect of grace that conferred a particular capacity on the former to direct the sensitive faculties to the true good of the person – does not create great difficulty. This is consistent with the fact that the relationship with God was still intact, so that man could participate more fully, in his entire being, in divine truth and goodness. If anything, the current situation of man appears contradictory, which St Paul describes with great clarity in Rom 7:18–19: not being able to live in harmony with his reason, or rather with his heart, is for man, a rational being, truly disconcerting. In St Thomas' conception, the order internally experienced by man in his own faculties was part of the more general order of 'original justice', a *rectitudo* that consisted first of all in the right relationship with God and, as a consequence of this, in the right order of the lower, sensitive faculties in relation to the spiritual ones (*mens*) and of the body in relation to the soul (cf. *STh* I, q.95, a.1, co.; q.94, a.1, co.; q.99, a.1, co.; *Super Rom.* c.5, l.3). In an evolutionary view of human origins, one can also think that God endowed man with gifts capable of healing those psychosomatic traits that, as a legacy of evolution, would have prevented such an order in man's faculties (Austriaco 2015 speaks in this regard of 'pre-teradaptive gifts'). This right order was also extended to the relationship

between man and the rest of creation: animals, plants, the environment. We will deal with this aspect later.

## 2.2. The question of suffering and death

It requires, without a doubt, more effort to imagine how Adam could have been exempt from suffering and death. It would be implausible, in fact, to imagine our progenitors endowed with a ‘bodily consistency’ such that they could not be harmed by the physical environment in which they were immersed; it would mean establishing a strong discontinuity in the created order, making man appear to be situated on another level, not only by virtue of his spiritual being, but also from a physical point of view. The same could be said, even more so, if one were to think of *paradise* or *eden* as a kind of earthly region ‘with a special status’, endowed with extraordinary conditions that would then cease as a result of original sin. St. Thomas’ theology contains the essential elements for a realistic and at the same time theologically significant view of paradise and man’s original condition.

The paradise in which man is placed is a region of the earth to all intents and purposes, governed by the same natural laws that we know today. In it, the same natural phenomena could occur, including the calamities that occur today; animals and plants had the same nature and behaviour that we observe, including the existence of harmful factors such as snake venom and the natural aggressiveness that leads predators to hunt their prey (cf. Roszak 2022). Even without knowing the evolutionary history of our planet, Thomas’s view is remarkably in agreement with it, since he sees a strong continuity between our present condition in the world and that of the origins: the same laws governed plant and animal life then as now, including the ‘animal’ dimension that characterises human life in its corporeality (cf. *STh* I, q.97, a.3, co; q.98, a.2, co). Given this context, how could one think that man with his spiritual-bodily constitution, capable of physical interaction, could not suffer nor undergo death?

A first part of the answer is that, according to Thomas, man’s body ‘was indissoluble [*indissolubile*] not by reason of an intrinsic vigour of immortality; but there was in the soul a force supernaturally conferred by

God [*vis quaedam supernaturaliter divinitus data*], by which the soul could preserve the body from all corruption [*ab omni corruptione*], so long as it remained subject to God' (*STh* I q.97, a.1, co; cf. *ibid.*, q.76, a.5, ad 1). This virtue will be lost through sin and the consequent loss of grace. The just order having been broken in its principal point – the relationship with God – the condition of 'justice' or *rectitudo* is also lost in the relationship between man's soul and body. Thomas, referring to Augustine – in agreement also with the doctrine of Irenaeus and other Church Fathers – therefore clearly affirms that Adam, willed by God to be in relationship with Him (original holiness), would not have suffered death *had he remained in that relationship*. Immortality, in short, was not given as a 'definitive possession', but as a 'gift to be confirmed' in the course of existence by remaining in right relationship with God.

This allows for an observation. Man's original condition is not to be imagined as that which will characterise our resurrected existence at the end of time, as Thomas himself indicates (cf. *STh* I, q. 97, a. 3, co; *Com. Th.* I, 186). As seen in the glorious body of Christ, the resurrection will entail *the definitive possession of life*, unassailable by any external influence, and a lordship over space, time, and matter, as well as the laws that govern them. In addition to a virtue conferred by the soul on the body, the resurrected condition will plausibly require a transformation in matter itself, so that it can make itself available – through the power of the creator Spirit – to a more immediate and profound relationship with the spirit, so that the body can rightly be called a 'spiritual body' (cf. Vanzini 2011, ch. 4).

Let us return to the psychosomatic constitution of man in the original condition. Thomas' view that the soul confers *incommutability* on the body needs clarification. Man had all the functions and needs that characterise his corporeal nature: the need for food, sleep, and the avoidance of harmful interactions with natural agents (precise references to Thomas' texts on the subject are provided in Roszak 2020, to which we refer). Lack of food, for example, would have led to death, as would a violent collision with a blunt instrument. Man needed both the use of his own reason and God's providence to perform the acts necessary for his survival and to avoid potentially harmful agents.

We can interpret Thomas' doctrine in these terms: the virtue of the soul permitted primarily *rectitudo*, understood as the order of the sensitive powers with respect to the rational powers, of the body with respect to the soul. In addition, it conferred *incompactibilitas*, to be understood as a more powerful influence than the soul's actual influence on the body, such as to preserve it in its vital condition, but not without the need to guarantee to the body itself what its nature requires, like any other 'animal' body. Thus, in fact, it follows from the words of Thomas:

In the primitive state, the rational soul communicated to the body what belongs to itself as a soul [*quod competit ei inquantum est anima*]; hence the human body was rightly called animal, precisely because it received life from the soul. But the first vital principle of the lower beings, as Aristotle says in *De Anima*, is the vegetative soul, whose functions are nutrition, generation, and growth. Therefore, these functions must have been found in man in his primitive state (*STh* I, q. 97, a. 3, co).

It can therefore be said that the soul, in addition to its spiritual functions, also fully performed its function in relation to the body, that of 'animating' it; the body, for its part, had to be kept in the right condition according to what its physical-biological nature requires. Thomas' vision also appears reasonable within a scientific-philosophical framework of understanding matter and the body. In this sense, given the mutual correlation between soul and body, a greater influence of the spirit must also be reflected in the material dimension. But it is not necessary to think that the matter of the human body in its original state was governed by laws other than the physical and biological ones we know: it is sufficient to think that it was *also* subject, in a different way from today, to a greater influence of the human spirit, consistent with what has been said about *integritas*. Thus, the effect of grace which, let us remember, is the cause of the virtue conferred by the soul on the body, should be seen as an effect on the sensitive and affective powers, rather than on the organic-biological dimension of the body. In the organic-biological sphere the maintenance of the body and its preservation from harmful events would in fact have required, in much the same way as today, appropriate care.

Hence, for such care man could count on his own rational resources, but also – in a different and superior way than today – on a more perfect ‘natural order’ and, above all, on divine providence. As already mentioned, for Thomas the *rectitudo*, the original just order also concerned man’s relationship with nature outside himself. This order, thanks to which man would not suffer harmful effects from the outside, should be seen: a) partly due to man’s own spiritual-body constitution in its original state, b) but above all as guaranteed by providence.

As an effect of man’s original conditions (a) one can think of his ability to dominate animals, even the ferocious ones. ‘Other animals by their natural instinct [*secundum aestimationem naturalem*] have a certain participation of prudence and reason: which accounts for the fact that cranes follow their leader, and bees obey their monarch. So all animals would have obeyed man of their own accord, as in the present state some domestic animals obey him’ (*STh* I, q. 96, a. 1, ad 4). In other words, we might think that a greater ‘strength’ of the human spirit, as well as guaranteeing a fuller lordship over oneself and one’s own body, would also allow a lordship over other creatures, particularly animals. Regarding this possibility, without claiming to give evidence of it but only clues to its plausibility, we can recall the lives of numerous saints (Francis, Anthony, Martin de Porres, Philip Neri) who, even in the not so distant past, testify to the possibility of a lordship of man over animals that goes beyond our ordinary experience.

### 2.3. The care of divine providence

More extensive and important is the help that man received from divine providence (b). Thomas refers to it many times, not only as the cause of the general natural order, but as the help that guards and protects [*tuetur*] man in a concrete way. This is how he expresses himself, for example, regarding collisions with objects:

Man’s body in the state of innocence could be preserved from suffering injury from a hard body; partly by the use of his reason, whereby he could avoid what was harmful; and partly also by divine providence, so protecting [*tue-*

*batur*] him, that nothing of a harmful nature could come upon him unawares. (*STh* I, q. 97, a. 2, ad 4).

Providence is also called upon to protect man from the dangers of noxious plants or snake venom (cf. *Super Sent.* II, d. 14, q. 1, a. 5, ad 7). And we can say more generally, with P. Roszak, that after sin, ‘what changed was the fact that divine providence ceased to provide protection against the natural course of things’ (Roszak 2020, 75). In this sense, we can think divine help would have guarded man also against contracting disease: his body could be affected by a virus, but would be preserved by God’s providence. As Benedict XVI pointed out on one occasion, ‘In the first Chapters of the Book of Genesis we find two important images: the garden, with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the serpent (cf. 2:15–17; 3:1–5). The garden tells us that the reality in which God has placed the human being is not a wild forest but a place that protects, nurtures, and sustains’ (Benedict XVI 2013).

Evocative, albeit indirect, clues as to the plausibility of a similar situation for man in paradise may be: a) the Gospel passages in which Jesus affirms as a matter of course – in the context of a relationship of trust between man and God – the possibility of asking for divine intervention even in a very ‘concrete’ way. Recall how the Lord explains to the disciples the reason for their failure in healing the possessed man: ‘Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you’ (*Mt* 17:20; cf. also *Lk* 17:6; *Mt* 6:25 ff); b) the lives of numerous saints, which testify to a similar possibility: think of the ‘naturalness’ with which a Catherine of Siena or a Vincent Ferrer obtained miracles of all kinds, in an almost immediate way, by asking God for them in prayer. Evidently, this took place in the context of an intimate relationship with God and not without His particular disposition regarding the mission entrusted to them (which explains why other saints did not have an identical familiarity with the miraculous).

We could go on to consider many other human situations, such as ageing or experiencing fatigue (cf. Roszak 2020, 69). It is not our intention to

go into them. Suffice to conclude with a reference to the most dramatic situation that man experiences in his present condition: death. The exclusion of death from the original condition did not mean an indefinite continuation of that condition; on the contrary, since man's end is always the same – participation in the divine life in glory – man would have to be confirmed in grace, through a free choice, in order to be elevated to the definitive condition of glory (cf. *STh* I, q. 102, a. 4, co). However, this elevation would not have been a matter of death, separation of the soul from the body, nor of existential laceration, nor of a tear in human relations. Péguy's poetic words express the drastic change that occurred with sin (Péguy 1946, 13):

Ce qui depuis ce jour est devenu la mort  
N'était qu'un naturel et tranquille départ.  
Le bonheur écrasait l'homme de tout part.  
Le jour de s'en aller était comme un beau port.

### 3. The theological significance of God's providential care

With the help of St Thomas' theology, we have highlighted the fundamental principles that allow us to think of Adam and Eve's condition as exempt from suffering and death: without requiring the assumption of different laws for matter and nature. In this sense, the possibility of the original state does not, in our opinion, contradict what we know about the world today; that is, it does not require us to deny what we know about the way nature 'worked' even in past ages, well before the appearance of man on earth. Rather, it is, to use Roszak's expression, an 'expanded understanding of nature' (Roszak 2020, 70), a broad understanding of nature as a dynamic reality open to grace, but not ontologically different from how we know it today.

It is useful at this point to consider the theological significance of such a view. Not only does it support the fundamental truth that indeed in God's creation all was good and the human condition could be described as 'very good' (cf. *Gen* 1), without a shadow of either spiritual or physical

evil. But there is also a more specific reason why the vision just outlined, in which *God's providential care of man in his original state* plays a major part, seems reasonable and expedient.

The central point is the following: the right relationship with God, the trusting relationship that He wanted to establish with Adam and Eve can be thought of as the *relational sphere* in which they could have naturally received, asked for, and obtained from Him what was necessary or convenient. God's paternal providence and the help of angelic creatures – an aspect neglected in recent theology but so dear to the Fathers (cf. Daniélou, 2009) – could well have guaranteed man the care and protection he needed. This should have strengthened and consolidated man's trust and love for God, whose paternity could be experienced in a more immediate and concrete way than is the case today (cf. Lewis 2009, 73–74, 88). The filial relationship was the condition for God's special care and, on the other hand, such care would strengthen the sense of filiation in man. It was precisely the fact that man was not self-sufficient – as a spiritual-bodily being in a material environment governed by the same laws that operate in his body – and remained so throughout the entire earthly phase of his existence, that would have enabled him to progress in the good, to tighten his union with God and to strengthen his decision, his free 'yes' to God in order to be confirmed in grace (cf. Roszak 2020, 85). The essence of such a decision would have been to 'believe in the love' of the Father, to make the free and loving relationship with Him the foundation of his existence and of his good relationship with other men and with nature. Not wanting 'to be like God' (cf. *Gen* 3:5), but choosing 'to be a child of God', committing himself to His word and love, would have been the fulfilment of man's vocation.

In this vision, when the trusting relationship with God – of which the providential, paternal, and concrete care for man was a sign – is severed by the progenitors, in addition to losing the *sanctity* and *integritas* of their psychosomatic condition, they find themselves having to cope with life in the world with only their own natural strength. At this point they will no longer even be able to pass on to their descendants – through generation and interpersonal relationship – that intimacy and immediacy of re-



relationship with God of which they were beneficiaries and in which they should have remained, along with their descendants (cf. Barrajon 2009, 133, 135). In this sense, one can think of a 'relational type of transmission' of the consequences of original sin, as proposes Ratzinger, analogously Tanzella-Nitti, and others. The point to be emphasised, however, is that by accepting Adam and Eve's choice, God accepts that the possibility of having his special providence for mankind concretely experienced in the world is lost: that providence that would have preserved man against the blind forces of nature. In a world of human relations that from the very beginning is dramatically distorted precisely in its founding relationship, that with God, it becomes 'convenient' that the human family is deprived of those gifts that manifested and were the very effect of the original relationship with God.

From then on, God's closeness and his love for man will manifest itself in a very different and less obvious way. Our present condition, characterized by physical evils, is a *sign* and effect of something deeper and more serious, distance from God; it is a *call* to seek in a relationship with God the true meaning of living, driven also by the most vivid experience of our non-self-sufficiency (cf. also the interesting reflection on pain as 'God's megaphone' in Lewis 2009, 91, 93). The eternal Son, by becoming incarnate, dying, and rising again for us has revealed and constitutes in his very existence the new 'way' that the Father opened after the fall of our progenitors to draw us to the fullness of communion with Him, in the renewed creation.

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