

A Tale of Will & Grace



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Ad Maiorem Dei Gloria

This paper is a fictional tale of a conversation between Jack and Father Al, Pastor of St. Ambrose Church. As Jack contemplates joining the parish, he expresses his doubts about the doctrine of Original Sin. "How can my young son be guilty of anything?" He asks....

It is a real pleasure to meet you Jack! Welcome to St. Ambrose. We at CACINA are a very open community, and although we are very Catholic in our core beliefs and practices, we maintain an open dialogue about some of the complex issues that make up Catholic doctrine. The one you are bringing up is a good example. Many people, me included, wrestle with what exactly “original sin” means. And, as you say, it comes right into full focus when you look at an innocent child like your Son and think how could a gracious and loving God have any animosity for such a wonderful person as he?

“Yea, ya know Father Al, it’s almost like God is playing some sort of game. He launches us into life with the deck already stacked against us. Why even let us be created if you’re not welcomed back into heaven in the first place? Who would treat their kid that way? I’d rather believe that God IS love, as they say, and that it’s the church doctrine that’s all screwed up – like many of them are – made up by a Church that loves finding ways to make us feel like crap. Why? So they can control us, because then we will need them to get out of our rotten conundrum. I think that’s why they call us ‘sheep’ ya know.”

Ha!! I often have joked with my mentor, Father Peter, that our CACINA bishops – if we are going to truly reflect a different attitude - ought to get rid of their crosiers, which in reality is nothing more than a hook that shepherds used to hold a sheep by its neck so they could shove it back into the flock, or hold it down so it could get fleeced, and replace that crosier with a fishing pole. Fish at least have to be lured in - and they typically put up quite a fight – AND once caught they keep flopping around to get away. To catch a fish, takes a lot of work - a lot of convincing! I think that’s how a lot of people approach religion – just like you Jack!

Tell me more about your boy. It sounds like you love him very much.

“Absolutely! He is only a year old but as I said, he’s perfect.”

He is very lucky to have a Dad such as you. I’ll bet you want only the best for him and that you will do anything and everything you can for him, right?

“Of course!” said Jack.

But let me ask you a question. If we were to ask our Dads, who I’m sure would’ve said the same about us when we were born, were there ever times when we let them down, or even got them really pissed off at us... what would they say?

“My Dad would say – HA! How many hours do you have to talk?”

Yea mine too. In fact, there were times in my relationship with my Dad when things got really tense. We didn’t get along at all. I really thought he was downright stupid – and worse, he was stubborn as a mule about his stupidity – really set in his ways – because he didn’t realize how smart I had become!!

Well you know that old saying: “The older I get, the smarter my Dad gets!” Well that’s me to the “T”. What an idiot I was then. As life taught me its inevitable lessons, I discovered that Dad wasn’t as stupid as I had thought he was.

As I think about it, most of it was caused by my trying to establish my own personality and my own life. To his credit, he was wise enough to give me the room to go my way and make my own mistakes. But in the background, he was always there. He even came out one night in a blizzard to help me get my car started. He lent me – correction – he GAVE me more money than I can count when I was in a jam. He was even the one guy that called me out of the blue when my first love affair broke up to tell me to be strong and that everything will be ok – by the way it was my first gay relationship – the gay thing took a long time for my Dad to accept - so I can only imagine what a leap that was for him.

“He sounds like a fantastic Dad, Father Al. I could tell a very similar story about my Dad.”

What I now know Jack, is that what my Dad wanted down deep, was for me to respect and honor him because I truly wanted to, and not because I was dependent on him. Out of love for him you might say, and not because I had to. Does that make sense?

“Sure does”.

Well my question to you, Jack is – you know your kid’s going to get to that same place that you and I did - where he makes choices against your wishes and thinks you are stupid and pigheaded – and suddenly he won’t seem so perfect will he? How will you feel then?

“It’s a good question, Father Al. I like to think I won’t take it too personally and will love and help him right through all the tough times. But if the truth be told, I guess it will depend on how it unfolds – how bad it gets – how bad he rebels. But what I ultimately want is to have a relationship with my son that is “man to man” ...and based on love and respect, that lasts forever, just as you said.”

I’m sure you’ll be fantastic Jack and step up like the good Dad you are, and I respect your wisdom that a lot of it will depend on what he actually does. But what we’re talking about - although the analogy limps a bit - it’s pretty close to the story of Adam in the Garden of Eden.

“Ha! I was wondering where you were going with this.”

Well for me, what Genesis tells us is that God, as the perfect Father, brought about human beings in *his image* – in other words “equipped” to be “perfect” sons and

daughters – just as He is perfect. That’s how Adam starts out doesn’t he? And God gives his new children everything – a Paradise in fact.

But just as our Dads did, and as you will be with your son, God wants His children to love Him because they choose to, to have a relationship that is built on genuine respect and admiration...and ultimately loving obedience.

So, He builds into us a thing called a “will” – a FREE WILL - an ability to decide what WE want, with the hope that we will freely choose Him... and all He asks of Adam and Eve is to use their free will to do just one little thing: avoid eating from one particular tree for if they do, they will die. It’s amazing that God not only says “Do this because I am asking you to” – but He also says it’s really for your own good. Now doesn’t that sound like our Dads talking or what?

“Yep sure does...but hey Father AI, I know how the story ends. They listen to the snake and lose it all.”

Well not quite. They lost Paradise for sure - but they gained shame and guilt and they earned a fundamentally different relationship with God – and it was not the one that God wanted. They freely gave into the temptation because they believed they would become like a god themselves – or so the serpent told them. That was a huge mistake – because by seeking to be gods, they made a decision that they did not need the real God and in so doing pushed out God’s Divine Life within them. The Church’s way of saying this is that they rejected God’s Sanctifying Grace...They jettisoned it right out of their souls.

So, remember what you said about how you would relate to your kid, depended on the nature of the rejection or the rebellion? Well this rebellion was really bad. It will be one thing for your kid to disobey you, but what if he was in the military and he disobeys a General? He’d be in way bigger trouble right? Adam and Eve rebelled against God so you can see that alone puts this in an infinitely bigger and worse category.

And one last thing – although fundamentalist want to see Adam as an individual person - the actual Hebrew word is **ha-adam** which is best translated as the “human” or even the “earthling” believe it or not. In other words, “Adam” is a stand-in for all of us. And what the Church is saying is that from our very beginning, we as a race, have this tendency to get it wrong, and with weakened wills, freely choose indulgences and distractions and false satisfactions (like the forbidden fruit) that are far less than what we need, which is God Himself. That tendency St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas call “concupiscence”. The early Jews had their own name for it, **yetzer hara** (יצר הרע) or an evil inclination.

And all of this my friend, is what we carry in us from our birth, our inheritance from Adam and Eve...and that inheritance is what the Church calls “Original Sin” – a tendency

to rebel, to want to go it alone and do our own thing, to freely chose the wrong stuff and go without the help – the Grace - that God had planned for us from the moment of creation. None of this was done “to us” by God, but it was done “by us, to us.” We as a race, used our free will to choose a desire to rebel as a pre-condition of our very nature.

“I never saw Original Sin as something that we humans have done to ourselves. So, I guess my boy has it already programmed in him, just like I have it too. We all have that tendency to rebel and focus inward on our self-interests right? So now what?”

Well, have you ever heard that ‘when one door closes, God opens another’? Our God is a God of second chances – and third, and fourth, and fifth and *ad infinitum* chances. And He never abandons us. There is an interesting little detail in the third chapter of Genesis where, after God has banished Adam and Eve from Eden, the Bible says: “*For the man and his wife, the Lord God fashioned leather garments with which He clothed them*” and then goes on to say God “settled” them in a land east of Eden. Adam and Eve’s sin revealed their nakedness to them and they were full of shame because of it. Yet it is God who, even though He was offended, provides for them nonetheless. Kind of like our Dads – always there in the background, always wanting to help.

So just like when that day comes, when your son majorly screws up, and it will be your big chance to really show your love for him, Original Sin provides God the opportunity to step in again to show His infinite mercy and love for us. And I’ll also bet that when that day comes, it will be you who will make the first move to restore your relationship with your kid. In our case, it is God Himself who time and time again throughout salvation history, offers to restore the relationship we had with him. That effort reached its pinnacle with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – God Himself. Do you recall the hymn the Deacon sings at the Easter vigil as we light the Easter candle?

*What good would life have been to us,
had Christ not come as our Redeemer?
Father, how wonderful your care for us!
How boundless your merciful love!
To ransom a slave you gave away your Son.
O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam,
which gained for us so great a Redeemer!*

Jesus, our great Redeemer, is the perfect choice to make humankind’s relationship with God right again. As God, He was the perfect “currency” to make restitution for us, and as human He stood in for all of us.

But there is a bigger agenda for Jesus than just settling our debt. He came to show us how we, as God’s children, should act. In His life, His relationships, His teaching, His determination, and ultimately His passion, He shows us the way to live.

Adam showed us arrogant pride in wanting to be a god and thus he embraced total disobedience. Jesus on the other hand, if I can paraphrase St. Paul, although he actually IS God, He humbled Himself and took the form of a slave and thus embraced – and showed us - total and unequivocal obedience - even accepting death on the cross. That's why Paul calls Him the New Adam! Jesus is the fresh start for humanity because He shows us how to regain our status as people made in God's image, and how to ensure we never lose Eden again.

So, Jack you see, without Adam, there is no Jesus. And without Jesus there is no Holy Spirit living within us, giving us once again the power to live in Heaven's Eden. We call that Grace. It's God coming through the blizzard to help us get home. All we need to do is use our free Will to accept and embrace his Grace....

“Not a bad explanation Father Al. I think I'm going to like it here at St. Ambrose. So, it all starts with our free will and it culminates with God's Saving Grace...Will and Grace eh!

Speaking of which, did you see *Will and Grace* is back for a new season!”

I did indeed Jack! I did indeed.