

Why Are People So Bad, and So Good?

POINT OF VIEW

Catholic Twin Circle

It seems that every week or so we read in the newspapers of some new atrocity or appalling crime. One week, a mother hands her daughter over to be raped to pay off a drug debt; a couple of weeks later someone guns down innocent people who happen to be around when he is on the prowl for victims. Doubtless by the time this is published something new and perhaps more grim will have happened.

Now, of course, these events are horrible, but for Catholics and other Christians they should not come as a surprise. After all, don't we believe in the doctrine of original sin? It was G.K. Chesterton, I think, who said that original sin was the one doctrine so evident that it needed no proof.

The only problem with this is that there's another side to things that seems to argue against our popular notion of original sin, namely, our everyday contact with ordinary people. True, in our daily lives, we can see many examples of greed, lust, cowardice and other vices, but also much kindness, courtesy and occasional courage.

And even more striking, perhaps, is just our everyday contact with others. For example, when we ask for directions, do people usually deliberately lead us astray? Yet, one might think that if human beings were really totally depraved, people would often mislead us for mere spite. Or that courtesy and genuine concern for others would be as rare as heroic sanctity. Or, in short, that no goodness at all would exist on this sorry Earth.

If the doctrine of original sin is true, why is there anything except evil?

The solution for this seeming contradiction lies in our notion of original sin. I am afraid that the popular notion in the United States is the Protestant one, not the Catholic.

It is well-expressed by Martin Luther in his *Small Catechism*, when he says that original sin "is the total corruption of our whole human nature." Just after this he writes that man "is inclined only to evil. . . ." Strong doctrine. And doctrine that I think we incline toward whenever we hear of some new mass murder or other outrage.

Fortunately, Catholic teaching on original sin does conform to our experience — both of everyday acts of goodness and what are fast becoming weekly horrors. For Catholic teaching proclaims that man's nature is in itself good, but that our nature is very weak — thus our unruly desires for acquisition and pleasure. But because our basic nature does tend toward the good, we do see many good deeds and honest acts performed.

Protestants and Catholics, in fact, disagree about what happened when Adam and Eve fell. Classic Protestant doctrine held that Adam's human nature in itself became depraved, ruined, totally evil. The Church, on the other hand, teaches that Adam and Eve lost certain gifts above and beyond their human nature, gifts which helped them keep their potentially boundless desires in check. The loss of these gifts now makes it very hard for us to be good, but it also means that our human nature in itself is not really bad.

I think that most of us, when we think about doctrine at all, tend to think of it as something remote from everyday life. But that is not the case.

True doctrine does illuminate human life, and, in turn, human experience can confirm the teachings of the Church. And, really, why should anyone be surprised at that?

Thomas Storck is a freelance writer who lives in Greenbelt, Md.