



One of the most controversial disputed questions in the dialogue between evolution and Christian faith today involves the historicity of Adam and Eve. Did they really exist? Does it even matter to the Catholic faith whether they existed or not? Why or why not?

In the next four essays in this series, we will answer these questions as an exercise of faith and reason that seeks to be faithful to the Catholic dogmatic tradition. Here, we will begin by laying out the theological context that establishes the Church's teachings on the origins of our species. In the next essay, we will summarize the doctrine of original sin because dogmatic statements concerning original sin are at the heart of our discussion. In the third essay, we will summarize the scientific data that supports the narrative of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. Finally, in the fourth essay, we will propose a conceptual synthesis that seeks to be faithful to both the theology and the science.

The most recent statement of the magisterium of the Catholic Church on the historicity of Adam and Eve is the papal encyclical, *Humani generis*, promulgated by Pope Pius XII in 1950. In that letter addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, the Holy Father taught the following:

When, however, there is question of another conjectural opinion, namely polygenism, the children of the Church by no means enjoy such liberty. For the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents. (no. 37)

Some Catholic theologians and lay faithful take this papal statement as definitive magisterial teaching that affirms the historical existence of an original couple from whom all human beings are descended. To put it another way, they think that this encyclical definitively rules out *polygenism*, which is the theological theory that human beings are descended from several original first couples.

The Historicity of Adam and Eve / Part I: Theological Data

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The theological theory that human beings are descended from a single original couple is called *monogenism*.

However, these same theologians and lay faithful often fail to consider the rest of the paragraph in the same encyclical where Pope Pius XII explains his reasoning for his conclusion that polygenism cannot be embraced by the Catholic Christian. The Holy Father taught:

Now it is in no way apparent how such an opinion [of polygenism] can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own. (no. 37)

In other words, at face value, Pope Pius XII ruled out polygenism because he could not imagine how an account of several original first couples could be reconciled with the Church's teaching on original sin. As we will discuss in the essays that follow, this is not surprising because scientists in 1950 believed that the human race was descended from several original first non-human couples who were scattered throughout the planet.



BEGINNING

As we will also see, scientists today now think that our species is descended from several first human couples living in the same geographical area. Therefore, in the fourth essay on the historicity of Adam and Eve, I will propose that this contemporary scientific account on human origins can be reconciled with the Church's teaching on original sin. Thus, I will argue that an account of polygenism that is in accord with everything that we know and believe about original sin remains true to the magisterial statement of Pope Pius XII in *Humani generis*.

Significantly, Pope Pius XII makes no mention of the Genesis text in his encyclical, because for Catholics, the disputed question over the historicity of Adam and Eve does not involve a debate over whether the biblical text should be interpreted literally or not. As we have discussed in earlier essays in this series on evolution and Christian faith, for the Catholic Christian, biblical interpretation is a work of both faith and reason that seeks to read the sacred text in line with all truth, theological and scientific, both of which have their source in God. It is a task that is

guided by the Holy Spirit who continues to work within and through His Catholic Church.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the International Theological Commission chaired at that time by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, published a theological statement on evolution that is open to polygenism. In its document, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, published in 2004, the Commission acknowledges that the scientific evidence points to a polygenic origin for our species: "While the story of human origins is complex and subject to revision, physical anthropology and molecular biology combine to make a convincing case for the origin of the human species in Africa about 150,000 years ago in a humanoid population of common genetic lineage" (no. 63). We will discuss this scientific evidence in the next essay in this series on evolution and Christian faith.

The Commission then makes the following theological claim: "Catholic theology affirms that that the emergence of the first members of the human species (*whether as individuals or in populations*) represents an event that is not susceptible of a purely natural explanation and which can appropriately be attributed to divine intervention" (no. 70, *my emphasis*). This suggests that both monogenism and certain types of polygenism remain viable theological opinions for Catholic theologians seeking to be faithful to the doctrinal tradition. **TOBE**

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