

SINS OF THE FATHER

SINS OF THE FATHER:
A CATHOLIC AND
BIBLICAL APPROACH TO
GENERATIONAL CURSES

Dan Schneider, PhD

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Dan Schneider, Ph.D.

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If the battle shall call you out, if the day of your contest shall come, engage bravely, fight with constancy, as knowing that you are fighting under the eyes of a present Lord, that you are attaining by the confession of His name to His own glory; who is not such a one as that He only looks on His servants, but He Himself also wrestles with us, Himself is engaged—Himself also in the struggles of our conflict not only crowns, but is crowned.

—Saint Cyprian of Carthage

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I.

OPEN WIDE THE DOORS FOR CHRIST: THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Pope Francis declared 2025 a jubilee year, which is a long-standing tradition that involves opening the doors of certain basilicas in Rome that are formerly closed except during one of these unique years.¹ By making a pilgrimage and walking through one of the holy doors, a Catholic can obtain an indulgence.² Pope Saint Paul VI defined an indulgence as:

The remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins forgiven as far as the guilt is concerned, which the follower of Christ with the proper dispositions, and under certain determined conditions acquires through the interventions of the Church, which, as minister of the redemption, authoritatively dispenses, and applies the treasury of satisfaction, won by Christ and the saints.³

This means that under the normal conditions, an indulgence can be attained for oneself or a soul in purgatory.⁴ Specifically,

¹ On Holy Doors, see Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 252–53.

² See USCCB, *Jubilee 2025 – Pilgrims of Hope*.

³ Pope Saint Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, Norm 1.

⁴ “A plenary indulgence can be gained only once a day. In order to obtain it, the faithful must, in addition to being in the state of grace: have the interior disposition of complete detachment from sin, even venial sin;

an indulgence does not forgive one's sins (the person needs to go to confession for that), but it makes "satisfaction" for sins and "the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sin as far as the guilt is concerned." *Satisfaction* is a legal term meaning *giving security or bail, satisfying a creditor and, therefore, a plea or apology and the making of amends, reparation for injury*.⁵ Of significance here are two points. One, a jubilee year, such as this one declared by Pope Francis, highlights the difference between sin and the effects of sin. Namely, the Church, in her mercy, provides an opportunity to make satisfaction for the effects of sin, which is the temporal punishment due to sins already sacramentally forgiven. Secondly, all sin requires satisfaction—that is, making of amends, or reparation for injury. Notably, an indulgence is not the remission of the guilt of sin, as that is reserved for the sacrament of Penance, but of the temporal penalty due to sin. Keep this important distinction in mind as we move along.

The Plague of Modernism

In this book, I hope to contribute to the theological conversation on the topic of what is commonly referred to as "generational sin" and often seen at the parish level in workshops held and Masses offered for "the healing of the family tree." I approach the topic not only as a biblical and patristic scholar but also as one who has worked for many years in the field of exorcism as a lay auxiliary to several exorcists,

have sacramentally confessed their sins; receive the Holy Eucharist (it is certainly better to receive it while participating in Holy Mass, but for the indulgence only Holy Communion is required); pray for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff." Apostolic Penitentiary, *The Gift of Indulgence*, no. 4 (29 January 2000).

⁵ Latin lexical information is taken from Lewis and Short, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*.

including Father Chad Ripperger. On the one hand, anyone who has worked in the field of exorcism or deliverance will have observed *something* at work that seems to interconnect families, patterns, if you will. On the other, those who propose a system of a sin that is “transgenerational” or “intergenerational” (these words appear to be used interchangeably) often fail to give proper theological distinctions when putting forth this novel idea (by novel, I mean not grounded in Tradition). That is, they rightly note that there is a *phenomenon de facto* in the field which suggests a certain connection between parents’ sins and their children, but often fail to distinguish between the sin and the effects of sin (something which *is* grounded in Tradition). The collapse of that distinction betrays a Protestant (or at least non-Catholic) influence in asserting that there is an intergenerational transmission of a personal sin of an ancestor that needs to be severed in some way for someone to be healed. Some Catholic theologians, noting that influence, dismiss the concept altogether, but to do so, they have to explain away the words of God Himself at Sinai, when He gave the Ten Commandments to Israel: “For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers’ wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation” (Ex 20:5). Others have uncritically accepted this in theory and practice into the charismatic renewal because, at a certain level, they see some fruit. Here, I hope to take the reader on a walk through the relevant biblical texts and key Church Fathers with a view toward a clearer understanding of a Catholic perspective.

A scholar knows to look at the assumptions behind the assertion, so I begin with a brief explanation of modernism. A generation ago, on the heels of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, Pope Saint Pius X warned against the

dangers of modernism, a belief structure which he called “the summation of all heresies.”⁶ He stated that while the previous generation of Catholics had to contend with the errors of Protestantism, the future generation will be confronted with the problem of modernism.

The danger of this belief system lies in the fact that it identifies truth not by any objective criterion but through some subjective reality. His predecessor, Blessed Pope Pius IX, noted as the crux of the error of modernism: “Human reason, without any reference whatsoever to God, is the sole arbiter of truth and falsehood, and of good and evil; it is law to itself, and suffices, by its natural force, to secure the welfare of men and of nations.”⁷ That is, truth is whatever I identify it to be because there is no authority over and above the *autonomy* of the individual. I am my own magisterium in determining doctrine, interpreting the Bible, and judging right and wrong. Ultimately, I—the autonomous self—am the standard by which all things may be judged.

The philosophical underpinning of that false autonomy is sometimes referred to as *immanentism*, which reduces truth—even the revealed religious truths, as part of the Deposit of Faith—to human experience.⁸ Consequently, not only the truth contained in Scripture but also the nature and reality of the Church and priesthood, doctrine, morality, and even human sexuality and gender are understood by the modernist’s own subjective standards.⁹ Pope Saint Pius X also

⁶ Pope Saint Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, no. 39.

⁷ Pope Blessed Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors*, no. 3.

⁸ The Latin word *in+manere* means to “remain within” and, therefore, this belief system maintains that exterior reality is inferior to the expression of the interior, subjective, and autonomous self. Pope Saint Pius X addresses the errors of this belief system in *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, nos. 19–20.

⁹ Perhaps the most extreme example of this modernist fallacy is that gender is a social construct and, therefore, that one can self-identify in a gender other than one’s biological assignment at birth.

referred to “the plague of modernism,” which he identified by several marks:¹⁰

1. Rejection of the dogma of the Fall and the effect of original sin.
2. Rejection of the supernatural.
3. Rejection of the law of the redemptive value of suffering.
4. Rejection of authority structure (ecclesial and civil); and as a result,
5. Rejection for the need of a Redeemer or the mediation of the Church.

I treat this briefly here to highlight a key point—namely, that the concept of inherited guilt and punishment for sin finds subtle overlap with each of these marks, as will be seen. Of significance here as well is a modern tendency to dismiss the effects of sin with a false belief that sinful actions (or curses, for that matter) do not have any effect or punishment, especially if I did not *mean* any harmful effects. The demon always works in the objective, however, while he drives us to react in the subjective, in the emotions.

Where the philosophical underpinning of modernist thought is immanentism, its theological base is called process theology, which is a blend of evolutionary theory and gnostic dualism.¹¹ Father John Hardon defines this as:

¹⁰ Pope Saint Pius X, *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*, no. 22.

¹¹ Gnosticism is theory which purports salvation by secret knowledge and still finds its way into various Christian movements and thought today. As Father Hardon notes, “although Gnosticism is the invariable element in every major Christian heresy, by its denial of an objective revelation that was completed in the apostolic age and its disclaimer that Christ established in the Church, a teaching authority to interpret decisively the meaning of the revealed word of God.” Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 232. Dualism is “any view of reality that holds, there are two fundamentally and irreducibly different types of being or operations. Thus, God and the world, spirit and matter, intellect and will, truth and error, virtue and sin are typical expressions of dualism.” Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 173.

A view of reality, including what Christianity calls God, which sees everything still in the process of becoming what it will be, but nothing really is. It is called theology because it is a form of evolutionary pantheism which postulates a finite god who is becoming perfect, but is not (as Christianity believes) infinite and all-perfect from eternity. It is called “process” because it claims that the universe (including God) is moving towards completion, without identifying what this completion is or when or whether it will be reached. On these terms, nothing is stable, nothing certain, because nothing really is. There are no determined moral laws, no absolute norms of conduct, no certain principles of thought, and no means of knowing anything. There is no “thing,” since what people call “things” are moving functions that keep changing in their very being. Everything, including the thinking mind, is ever becoming what it was not, and ceasing to be what it was.¹²

Thus, process theology sees both God and doctrinal truths as changing and ever-revealing.

This, however, is decidedly not the same as what the Church teaches as God revealing Himself through stages. As the *Catechism* states:

The divine plan of Revelation is realized simultaneously “by deeds and words which are intrinsically bound up with each other” and shed light on each another. It involves a specific divine pedagogy: God communicates himself to man gradually. He prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural Revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. (CCC 53)

The *Catechism* here refers to Saint Irenaeus and Saint John Chrysostom in reference to the “divine pedagogy.” This second-century Church Doctor spoke of what he called the

¹² Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 443.

divine *condescension*.¹³ Namely, God lowers Himself to where we are and enters into the human condition and affairs. The ultimate condescension is the Incarnation, and all Revelation points to this event “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4).

The movement, however, does not stop with God’s condescension. He lowers Himself (in Greek, *synkatabasis*) to where we are to raise us up (*anabasis*) to where He is. The concept of inherited guilt falls within this divine pedagogy, this lowering and stooping of God, whose ultimate goal is to raise, and even divinize, man to share in divine life. While modern man may welcome this *synkatabasis*, however, he often bristles against any suffering required to remove the obstacles to our *anabasis*, our union with God. This raising up of man, however, is found in a threefold continuum of the purifying, illuminating, and transforming effects of grace. God loves us with a passionate love, yet sins and vices are obstacles to our ascent to share in His life. Accordingly, in this divine pedagogy, God uses angels, fallen and glorified, as divine instruments to remove all obstacles to our *anabasis*.

This distinction between a changing God and a God who reveals Himself in stages is relevant to the discussion on generational spirits because many theologians will point to the “green grapes proverb” found in the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel as nullifying God’s words at Sinai, where He said that He punishes parents’ sins “to the third and fourth generation” (Dt 5:9). To the modern mind, moreover, a God who punishes sin seems unloving and unjust. Thus, the assumption behind the assertion is that when what God said in one place of Scripture (the giving of the Law at Sinai) contradicts another (the green grapes proverb in Ezekiel and Jeremiah), then the latter expression is accepted. But is it that simple? In this inquiry, therefore, I attempt to slow down this movement

¹³ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 17.1. See also CCC 101.

for the reader and explore this concept in depth by first unpacking the relevant Bible passages before looking at the treatment on the topic by two Doctors of the Church, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas.

At the end of each chapter are included three things: an example from the field, a message of hope, and a prayer. The case studies serve a catechetical purpose by grounding the theological discussion in the tangible, through the lived experience of exorcists and those who work with them as lay assistants. In one act, for example, a single Eucharistic miracle substantiates the Real Presence more succinctly than volumes of theological treatises. Accordingly, the stories presented here reveal some aspect of generational curses and illuminate the principles put forth in the chapter. The message of hope is precisely that. While this is a heavy topic that needs precise language to unpack, it can be overwhelming. The Christian, however, should never give in to despair when battling in the spiritual life.

The prayers at the end of each chapter are taken from Saint Alphonsus Liguori, to whom the Church has given the title “The Doctor of Prayer.” Pope Saint Pius X offered, as the remedy for the “plague” of modernism, a renewed devotion to Our Lady, recalling her title “the Destroyer of All Heresies.” To this end, I have drawn from that great lover of Our Lady, Saint Alphonsus, with the hope that he instills in the reader an increased confidence in her powerful intercession. My hope, as well, is that the reader also learns from him *how* to pray, and the language and attitude of the penitent soul standing in awe before the Lord. Included also is a specific prayer taken from *Deliverance Prayers for Use by the Laity or Holy Hour of Reparation*, with the hope that the reader learns the specificity at times required in prayer and also the power

of reparation.¹⁴ In the end, is a brief conversation with Father Chad Ripperger on the Catholic approach to identifying and rooting out possible generational spirits.

Healing the Family Tree or Healing Family Members?

The Conference of Catholic Bishops in Spain has recently addressed the issue of the modern notion referred to as “healing of the family tree” and “intergenerational sin,” citing Anglican missionary and psychologist Kenneth McCall as having been the first to popularize the phenomenon. The document mentions two Catholic charismatic priests, Fathers John Hampsch and Robert DeGrandis, as introducing the concept of intergenerational sin and healing the family tree (through so-called “healing Masses”) into Catholic thought and practice.¹⁵ Both priests, in fact, point to Anglican missionary and psychologist Kenneth McCall as having been the first to popularize the phenomenon, and describe their work as consistent with his.

One problem with this belief system is the implication that the living are helpless victims of the past. McCall, for example, speaks of a person being “a victim of ancestral control,” even to the point where, to one such man, “his words are not his own and his actions are not of his own volition.”¹⁶ McCall implies that the process is deterministic when he speaks of the “constricting bonds of the dead,” as if a “controlling force,” which, in

¹⁴ The prayers by Saint Alphonsus are cited from their works or compilations. The subsequent prayers are from Ripperger, *Deliverance Prayers for the Laity, Minor Exorcisms, Holy Hour of Reparation*. Used with permission.

¹⁵ See Conferencia Episcopal Española, *Su misericordia*, I.

¹⁶ McCall, *Healing the Family Tree*, 13.

fact, appears to nullify free will and personal responsibility for sin.¹⁷ Hence, he recommends the family tree be reconstructed and a “Eucharist” be held to help determine where the inter-generational sin lies, so they can break the “controlling force” that is still upon a living person. During such liturgical services, participants often receive alleged visions revealing past events, family secrets, and the like.

While Catholics offer Masses for the individual souls in purgatory, McCall’s solution is to “offer Eucharist” or a “Eucharist of deliverance” for a determined number of generations of males or females in a familial line. In McCall’s liturgical system, moreover, prayers for the dead are not for the souls in purgatory, in the Catholic sense, but serve as a function to sever the so-called bonds that connect ancestors with the living. The focus is on the sin and the bond so that the living can no longer be under “ancestral control.”¹⁸ He describes one such “Eucharist” as offered for “the eldest females of the preceding six generations.” Besides McCall and a charismatic woman, this service was presided over by “two clergymen, one doctor [and] two nurses.”¹⁹ The purpose was not to pray for the dead per se (in the Catholic sense) but as a means to break the “ancestral control” and spiritual bonds which were the cause of the present suffering of the individual.

¹⁷ McCall, *Healing the Family Tree*, 11.

¹⁸ As the Spanish bishops summarize: “According to this view, sins committed by ancestors in our family tree, which were not forgiven during the lifetime of those who committed them, would be the cause of physical and mental illnesses in their descendants. The way to cure such illnesses consists in identifying the sin in one’s own family tree. Then, through intercessory prayer, exorcisms and, especially, the celebration of a Eucharist, the Lord Jesus or the Holy Spirit is prayed to break the bond of sin between the person and his ancestors, thus achieving healing, often total and practically instantaneous.” Conferencia Episcopal Española, *Su misericordia*, I (my translation of the Spanish)..

¹⁹ McCall, *Healing the Family Tree*, 15.