

Family Ties in *Cur Deus Homo*

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The reality of biological family, family as a concrete existent plays a constitutive role in Anselm's Cur Deus Homo argument. It plays such a crucial role that Anselm writes a follow up treatise, De conceptu virginali et de originali peccato, to deal with issues left over from Cur Deus Homo. De conceptu proposes a revolutionary understanding of how original sin is transmitted, which defends the wholesomeness of married intercourse, insists upon the crucial contribution of the Blessed Virgin, and introduces principles which will lead to Duns Scotus' clear explication and defense of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Prof. Gene Fendt, in his paper for this session, appeals to the image of marriage in meditating on Anselm's theory of the atonement. Anselm's critics might not think of him as the consummate defender of family, but I believe Prof. Fendt's image is beautifully apt. Indeed, I want to go perhaps a step further and argue that the reality of biological family, family not as an image or a metaphor, but as a concrete existent, plays a constitutive role in the *Cur Deus Homo* argument. It plays such a crucial role that Anselm has to write a follow up treatise, *De conceptu virginali et de originali peccato* (henceforth *De conceptu*) to deal with issues left over from *Cur Deus Homo*. *De conceptu* will propose a revolutionary understanding of how original sin is transmitted, an understanding which defends the wholesomeness of married intercourse, which insists upon the crucial contribution of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and which introduces principles which will—in a couple of hundred years, the blink of an eye in Church time—lead to Duns Scotus' clear explication and defense of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Let us return to the original question with which Prof. Fendt began: Does Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* portray God as the cruel feudal lord demanding the sacrifice of His innocent Son to assuage His anger against His human creations who have robbed Him of His honor through their disobedience? Certainly not! As Prof. Fendt has explained, God both makes and accepts the sacrifice, not because He is cruel, but because He is loving! If mankind is to be restored to the fellowship with Him which God intended for us, we have to become the sort of people capable of enjoying His friendship. And that means we have to be sorry for the mess human kind is in, and if we're really sorry we will *want* to make amends. And, lo and behold, God works out a plan. Indeed, on Anselm's view, God's love drives Him—love *necessitates* a plan.

The critic might ask, if Anselm's theory is all about love, why doesn't he mention it every page or so, instead of at the longer intervals one finds in the text? There is a two-fold answer. First, Anselm, in his philosophical works and judging by the issues he takes up, prefers to carve out new territory. He does not belabor what everybody already knows. *Cur Deus Homo* is aimed at both Christians and non-Christians, to persuade the latter and enlighten the former. Christians already believe—at least they did in Anselm's day—that God sent His only Son out of love for the world. And Anselm's starting assumption is that even the non-Christians accept an

omnibenevolent God who made mankind for happiness. There is no need to hammer the thought that God acts out of love. Secondly, at about the same time he was finishing the *Cur Deus Homo* he wrote a “meditation,” a prayerful companion piece, containing an outline of part of the *Cur Deus Homo* argument. This “Meditation on Human Redemption” is just brimming over with appeals to divine love, as befits a work of its sort. It is clear that Anselm has no doubt, and assumes that his audiences have no doubt, that God is love. So Professor Fendt’s use of the image of marriage brilliantly illuminates what Anselm sees as the divine motivation in his theory of the atonement.

But there is a key step in the *Cur Deus Homo* argument which Prof. Fendt does not mention and which both friend and foe of the argument often miss. The atonement requires not only God’s love as our creator, but also Christ’s love as our brother. But what’s new about that? That Christ is “our brother” is a cliché. Of course Christ had to be a human being, like us in all things but sin, as Chalcedon has it. The *Cur Deus Homo* argument is that only God could pay the debt mankind owed, but since it was man that owed it, a God-man is necessary. QED.

But Anselm includes another crucial step, and it is a step which directly addresses the most fundamental question which motivates the *Cur Deus Homo*. Prof. Fendt sets up the question in the standard way: It is a scandal to non-Christians to claim that an omnipotent God would join with human nature and suffer and die. Put this way, the focus of the problem is on the suffering and dying. But here is how Anselm himself actually sets up the question,

The unbelievers, deriding our simplicity, object that we wrong and insult God when we assert that He descended into a woman’s womb, was born of a woman, grew up nurtured on milk and human food, and—to pass over the many other things which do not seem appropriate regarding God—that He endured fatigue, hunger, thirst, whipping, crucifixion between robbers, and death.¹

It is not just the suffering and death that is the issue. The first “insults” that Anselm mentions are the descent into the woman’s womb and being born of a woman. Gross! It is not enough to show the need for a God-man simpliciter. God, in His omnipotence, could have made a fully grown human being *ex nihilo* to assume. Then He could have skipped the *supreme* indignity of conception within a woman, and the unbelievers would have less to find shocking. But, Anselm will argue, a newly created man would not have been able to do the job which divine love demanded.

In fact, Anselm says in both *Cur Deus Homo* and in *De conceptu* that if all God wanted was good human beings He could have just scrapped the family of Adam and Eve after the original unpleasantness at the dawn of human history. God could simply have created new

¹ *Cur Deus Homo* (hereafter, CDH) 2.3, S. 2, p.50, ll.24-28. (Translations are my own. S refers to the F.S. Schmitt edition of Anselm’s *Opera Omnia*, followed by volume, page, and line numbers.)

human beings unrelated to the first pair, or He could have made a new race of humans out of Adam alone, but miraculously, the way Eve was created, that is, not through the process of natural generation. And maybe Humanity the Sequel would have turned out better, and there would have been no need for all that bizarre and unseemly rigmarole of Incarnation. Why in the world would God prefer to stick with and salvage fallen humanity rather than just starting over with shiny new human beings?

Anselm's answer is that God does not abandon His projects. And the project in question here is not just human beings, but human beings belonging to the biological family of Adam. (Anselm notes that "Adam" can stand for Adam *and Eve*.²) So God prefers to salvage rather than to start anew. And this ties in with the theme of family love which I hope to develop. If you, as a parent, have a child that is "damaged," physically, mentally or spiritually, you do not abandon it in favor of procuring a new and better one. Love involves a certain "particularity." It is this concrete individual that you love; and, even if, in some abstract way, this individual is similar to other individuals, you cannot just substitute some other for the beloved. In the case of humanity it is Adam and Eve and their children that God loves, and the literal biological family is important.

As Anselm explains the human situation, one of the great gifts that God gave to Adam and Eve was that new humans would be propagated from them. And God gave the first couple even greater power than just that of generating new humans. Adam and Eve could have passed along more than just human nature. Anselm writes,

What could more suitably show the magnitude of God's goodness and the abundance of the grace which He gave to Adam, than that those whose existence was in [Adam's] power such that, what he was naturally [i.e. a human being], they would be through him, and that by his free will, he would be able to propagate them so that they would have the same justice and happiness which he had.³

Adam, by sinning, lost original justice and so no longer has it to pass along. But his propagative nature is such a good thing that God will not scrap it, or its effects—the family of Adamic man—to start over. Anselm writes, “. . . if no one coming from this natural reproduction were saved, then [God] would have made that [reproductive] nature in vain, and would seem to correct it as if He had not made it properly, which would not be appropriate for the highest wisdom to do for any nature.”⁴

And in order to save us, the man who is God must belong to the Adamic family. The question here is: What sort of relationship is required, what sort of unity is there, between Christ and the rest of us such that He is able to pay our debt? Anselm explains,

² *De conceptu* (hereafter, DCV) 9.

³ DCV 23, S.2, p.164, ll.24-28.

⁴ DCV 17, S.2, p.158, ll.17-19.

But if He [God] made a new man, not from the family⁵ of Adam, he would not belong to the human family which is born of Adam. For which reason he would not owe satisfaction for it, because he is not from it. For just as it is right that a man should make satisfaction for the guilt of a man, it is necessary that the one making satisfaction should be the same one who sinned or a member of his family. Therefore just as sin is reproduced in all men from Adam and Eve, no one who is not either they or born from them, ought to make satisfaction for the sin of mankind. And since they are not able to do it, it is necessary that there should be someone from them who does it.⁶

In God's eyes the family of Adamic man, related by biological reproduction, is so valuable and beloved that it must be salvaged, rather than just starting over with new human beings. Happily the family *unity* is such that a man biologically descended from Adam, but *only* a man biologically descended from Adam, can pay the debt for all of us.

Anselm's theory of the atonement has the interesting consequence of making the biological contribution—the “seed” in Anselm's terminology—of the Blessed Virgin Mary a necessary component of the process. While biblical prophecy says that the Messiah must be descended from David, and hence from Adam, I do not know of any other theory of the atonement which includes this aspect as a necessary step in the process of our salvation. Augustine's proposal—rejected by Anselm at the beginning of *Cur Deus Homo*—was that, in sinning, Adam and Eve had given Satan just rights over mankind, and by killing the innocent Christ, Satan forfeits those rights. In becoming incarnate God sets a sort of “trap” for Satan. It may be, although it is not obvious, that Augustine's theory requires that the innocent victim be human.⁷ But Augustine himself certainly does not insist upon the *biological* connection between Christ and Adam as an ineradicable link in the causal chain of the process of atonement.⁸

Another popular theory of the atonement holds that Christ's major work is to serve as an example for the rest of us. (And Anselm certainly believes that Christ must be our example; it's just that there is more to our salvation than that.) In order for us to take Christ as our model, He must be human. And one could argue that, in order for us to see that He is truly like us, He must grow inside a woman and be born. But even that need not entail that the reproductive system of

⁵ I translate *genus* as family, since the whole point of the passage is that a non-Adamic human being, that is one who has human nature, but is not biologically descended from Adam, cannot do the job the Incarnation must do. So “kind” would be a mistranslation and “race” would not emphasize what needs to be emphasized here.

⁶ CDH 2.8, S.2, p.102-103, ll.26-6.

⁷ Augustine's theory has been popularized in our day by C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In that work the Incarnation, Aslan, is a (rational)lion, and not of the same species as the one who has given himself to the evil witch. In that angels cannot be killed, perhaps it is the case that in Augustine's universe only human beings are rational and mortal, so only a man can set the “trap” for Satan. (This image is from Augustine's Sermon 130, part 2).

⁸ *De Trinitate* 13. 13-14.

the Blessed Virgin actually supply some physical part of the God-man. Anselm's theory requires that Christ be descended, through physical reproduction, from Adam.

A related point worth considering is that in classical and early medieval biology, while there are several different views of procreation, all of them assign “. . . the major role in procreation to the male seed.”⁹ Anselm's theory, with its insistence on the physical descent from Adam, seems to entail that the seed of the Virgin contained everything physically required for Christ's historical link to Adam. In his third Prayer to Mary he says that Christ, “. . . was born of a mother to take our nature, and to make us, by restoring our life, sons of his mother.” In that Christ receives human nature through Mary we might see this as constituting an elevation of the female contribution to conception.

Certainly Anselm assigns to Mary a central role in the salvaging of the Adamic family, second only to God. In this prayer to Mary he writes,

He who was able to make all things out of nothing refused to remake it by force, but first became the Son of Mary. So God is the Father of all created things, and Mary is the mother of all re-created things. God is the Father of all that is established, and Mary is the mother of all that is re-established. For God gave birth to him by whom all things were made and Mary brought forth him by whom all are saved. God brought forth him without whom nothing is, Mary bore him without whom nothing is good. O truly, ‘the Lord is with you’, to whom the Lord gave himself, that all nature in you might be in him.¹⁰

Anselm allows to Mary a place above all other merely human beings. But Mary is descended from Adam through natural human reproduction. She has to be to supply the physical link that Anselm takes to be necessary for Christ to be a member of the family of Adamic man. But now the question addressed in *De conceptu* arises: If the human soul and body assumed by God must be born from the family of Adam, and that brood is pervasively infected with original sin, how can Christ be sinless? Anselm is writing before the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had been hammered out. (As we will see, his work provides a catalyst for the doctrine.) In *Cur Deus Homo* 2.16 Anselm had explained that Mary, at the time of the annunciation, is pure due to her faith in the future, saving work of Christ. (This precipitates an interesting exchange on whether God acts by necessity.) But the fact that Christ's human nature comes from Mary's seed presents a problem.

In Anselm's day the standard view on the transmission of original sin theorized that the seed of the parents of the new human being is tainted with original sin due to the concupiscence

⁹ John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1966), 89.

¹⁰ Prayer to Mary (3). Here I follow the translation by Sister Benedicta Ward, S.L.G., in *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

(the excessive desire) of the sexual act, and that taint stains the body of the newly conceived human being and, in turn, the body stains the soul. (This view is often attributed to Augustine, but perhaps it is an oversimplification or misinterpretation of Augustine's theory, if, indeed, Augustine can be said to have developed a "theory" on this issue.¹¹ I will refer to the position Anselm rejects as the "standard" view.) How then, as Anselm puts the question, could God "assume a man without sin out of the sinful mass of the human family?"¹² First off, the standard view must be rejected. Sin, Anselm insists, exists only in the will. (Anselm places great emphasis on, and spends a lot of time analyzing, the human will.¹³) The thought that the body *per se* could be sinful or contain sin does not make sense. The seed does not have a rational soul, hence it does not have a will, and so it cannot be sinful. (Anselm's view seems to be that the fetus is not ensouled until well after conception.¹⁴ His view is not clear; it probably owes a debt to 12th century biology, and it need not concern us here.) The biblical texts which suggest that human beings are conceived in sin are to be understood to mean that when the human being comes to have a rational soul, such that it has a will that owes obedience to God, then the person is sinful as being unable to will as he ought.¹⁵ This is not to say that the human being must have attained the "age of reason." The will owes the debt through the human nature of the new human being even before the human being is capable of committing personal sins of his own.¹⁶

How is original sin transmitted, according to Anselm? That is something of a trick question on Anselm's account. Sin, the evil of failing to conform to the will of God, is not any kind of thing. Augustine—a possible, if misunderstood, source for the standard view—elaborated the privative theory of evil and bequeathed it to subsequent generations of philosophers. But Augustine himself sometimes writes as if evil were a sort of thing, a "nothing" that pulls the will, a darkness like black paint that enhances the overall picture, or, as in the case of original sin, a taint or stain that can be passed along physically from parent to child. Augustine even suggests that the sins of more recent ancestors might increase the burden of sin handed down to the new human being.¹⁷ Anselm brings his characteristic, analytic clarity to the privative theory. Evil, sin, is just a lack of what ought to be there. One of the splendid properties of the propagative nature which God gave to Adam and Eve was that, had they not sinned, they would have been able to

¹¹ In both *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* (1.24.27) and in *De gratia Christi et peccato originali* (2.37.42), Augustine speaks of original sin accruing to the child due to the lust which constitutes an inevitable aspect of intercourse, even in marriage, but neither of these texts says clearly that the physical seed of the parent is "tainted" (though the latter text speaks of the "contagion of sin"). And Chapter 20 of Book 10 of Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram* does speak of an "invisible concupiscence" and a "law of war" which seem to be transmitted from father to child in the "seminal reason" at intercourse. But here Augustine is meditating on possible theories of the origin of the soul, and the text does not justify calling the view which Anselm rejects "Augustinian." I thank Kevin McMahon for calling the *De Genesi* text to my attention and also for pointing out that the attribution of the rejected theory to Augustine is dubious.

¹² DCV 1, S.2, p.140, ll.3-4.

¹³ See my *Anselm on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ DCV 7.

¹⁵ DCV 14.

¹⁶ DCV 1-2.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Enchiridion* 56.

pass on the happiness and the original justice which God had given them. Once they threw it away they no longer had it to pass on. So there is no thing, “sin,” that gets transmitted through the Adamic family. And there is no stain or taint in the newly conceived body which then infects the soul. Rather the original justice and happiness do not get handed down when the child is conceived through the natural process involving the corrupted wills of its parents. The sins of more recent ancestors cannot add to the burden of sin, since original sin is just the absence of original justice. Once original justice is gone, it cannot get any more gone.¹⁸

How, then, is Christ born from the sinful human family? The key is that He is not conceived through the natural process involving the wills of merely human parents. Merely human parents cannot pass on the original justice in the generative process by which they pass on the human nature. That power has been lost to the propagative nature of the Adamic family. But a child conceived, not by the natural process, but by the immediate will of God, can be born with the original justice that God had given to Adam and Eve. And, of course, a child who happens to be fully God as well as fully man, in which the human will must agree with the divine will since there is only one *person* in the Incarnation, will have no trouble at all cleaving to the good. (Is Christ free since He must conform to the good? Yes, because all of His choices are “from Himself”.¹⁹)

Anselm’s analysis of the transmission of original sin has two interesting consequences. First, it abstracts the thought that even married sex involves unwholesome concupiscence out of its formerly central place in the doctrine of original sin. I do not *know* that Anselm himself continued to take a rather dim view of even licit intercourse, but I would not be surprised to discover that he did. In Chapter 10 of *De conceptu* he writes that Adam’s generative power was to be used justly and rationally, not in bestial or irrational pleasure. But Adam lost the ability to govern his desires, and lost it for the rest of us as well. This sounds like the Augustinian view of sexual desire. But we can say at least this; the sin with which each normally conceived human being is born is not some stain produced by the intercourse of his parents. It is just the absence of original justice. From the perspective of an age which finds nothing intrinsically unwholesome about sex within marriage, we can applaud the Anselmian thesis for helping to lay the groundwork for this more positive attitude.²⁰

A second interesting consequence is that Anselm’s insistence that the seed of the parents is not actually sinful will constitute an important step in the development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Anselm himself clearly does not propose the doctrine. In fact, that Mary be free of sin is not part of the structure of the *Cur Deus Homo* argument, and in *De conceptu* Anselm explicitly says that God could have accomplished the Atonement having assumed a

¹⁸ DCV 24.

¹⁹ CDH 2.10 and 17.

²⁰ Which is not to say that intercourse within marriage is free from the ravages of original sin. But perhaps the Anselmian approach suggests that licit intercourse is no more prone to destructive tendencies than are other licit activities – such as eating and doing philosophy – that can be done well or badly.

human from a sinful woman. It is simply more fitting that the mother of God be pure.²¹ I take that to mean that as far as the metaphysics of the situation is concerned, God can produce a sinless human from a sinful parent. Of course, in *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm proposes, as a methodological principle, that if it would be most fitting for God to do something in a certain way, then we can be sure that is how He does it.²² So if it is indeed most fitting that Christ be born of a pure woman, there is a sort of necessity involved, entailed by God's perfection. And Anselm argues that Mary is pure, through her faith in Christ's saving work. But the implication is that she becomes pure at the Annunciation. Anselm says that she was "cleansed" of sin by Christ's work, as were others who lived before the Incarnation. So, in spite of the very elevated status which Anselm ascribes to Mary—indeed she shines with a purity second only to God's!²³—he does not take her to have been exempt from original sin.

How, then, does his theory set the stage for the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception? The standard (Augustinian?) view had been that the concupiscence of the parents stains the physical beginning of the new person, the body, which in turn infects the soul. Anybody conceived in the usual way must be subject to that stain. Mary, the Church had always presumed, was conceived in the usual way, and so must be stained with sin. Anselm's rejection of the standard position, and his replacement for it, allowed for a different understanding. If the seed of the parents is not sinful *per se*, and if the newly conceived body is not where sin "resides," why couldn't God restore the original justice to the newly formed human being, at the moment of conception and ensoulment? The desire for justice which Adam and Eve had thrown away, and so were unable to pass on to their progeny, could be there in the will of the soul of the infant Mary and flower into virtue when she attained the age of reason. Eadmer, Anselm's student, offers a defense of the Immaculate Conception—interestingly in the context of defending the practice of celebrating a feast day for her conception—and Duns Scotus builds upon Anselm's understanding of the transmission of original sin to offer a well-developed defense of the possibility and appropriateness of the Immaculate Conception.²⁴ And what could be a more perfect image for the love God has for humanity than the Blessed Virgin who is, after all, merely a creature, and yet is restored to the original goodness God gave to mankind and is allowed to play a pivotal role in restoring the rest of us.

I began with the claim that Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* argument assumes and is shot through with the thought that God loves us. By "us" I do not mean human nature in the abstract, but rather the members of the human family of Adamic man. Augustine had said, and it is surely fair to hold that Anselm agrees, that God's point in making all of humanity through a first couple was that we would feel the unity of kinship.²⁵ Anselm holds that the joys of heaven, which those restored through Christ our brother, with the cooperation of Mary our mother, will enjoy, will be

²¹ DCV 18.

²² CDH 1.10.

²³ DCV 18. S2, p.159, l.17.

²⁴ Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid* (London: Cassell, 2000), 124-132.

²⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.1.

multiplied for each saved person by the joys experienced by every other person, because of the love we will bear for each other.²⁶ Anselm's work, including and especially his *Cur Deus Homo* argument, is imbued with love, divine and human, and not just a sort of misty, abstract love, but the intense and particular love associated with family.

²⁶ Anselm, *Monologion* 25.