

CATHOLIC WORSHIP

BRO. NORBERT CONNELL, O. P.



AMONG the many doctrines of the Catholic Church which are subject to misunderstanding among non-Catholics, Catholic worship seems to be one which is most unreasonably attacked. Other doctrines may be hard to believe and understand, for indeed some are mysteries; this doctrine of Catholic worship, however, contains nothing mysterious or superstitious, but rather is in accord with the primitive instincts of man. Because good Catholics are often seen kneeling in prayer before a crucifix, a statue or an image of a saint, there are some who accuse them of idolatry. To these people there is no difference between a Pagan before his man-made gods, and a Catholic before the images of Christ and His saints. Every well-informed person knows what a vast difference there is, and a clear understanding of this doctrine will convince those less informed of its reasonableness.

Worship, in a general way, we understand as honor or reverence which is shown to someone because of his excellence, because of some outstanding quality, or because of some noteworthy achievement. This worship or adoration is primarily interior since it consists fundamentally in an act of the intellect which perceives the excellence. But ordinarily we do not stop here. The mere recognition of those qualities is not sufficient. We must manifest our appreciation of them by some exterior action.

Since man has received from God a body as well as a soul, it is fitting that he should use both of them to render to his Creator his acts of homage. Human nature is so constituted that the emotional moods of man seek some outward manifestation. Gestures and speech are nothing more than the outward expression motivated by some inward act. Consequently, in man, an act of worship is generally both interior and exterior at the same time. True, he can adore with interior worship without the exterior manifestation, but to adore with mere exterior

worship without some interior act of the intellect would be mere comedy, hypocrisy. St. Thomas,¹ in answering the question "Whether adoration denotes an action of the body," says, "Since we are composed of a twofold nature, intellectual and sensible, we offer to God a twofold adoration; namely a spiritual adoration consisting of the internal devotion of the mind, and a bodily adoration which consists in an exterior humbling of the body"; and as he proceeds with his answer he tells us that the exterior actions are referred to the interior as being of greater import, and that exterior adoration is offered on account of the interior adoration.

In fulfilling their religious duties, just as in every day life, men have always made use of external conventional signs. Prostrations, inclinations, bending of the knee are all recognized as manifestations of honor and respect. These are not reserved to the Supreme Being. Indeed they are used even between men. Sacrifice alone, the preëminent mode by which man, Pagan, Jew, and Christian, has expressed adoration of the Deity, is the one type of reverence offered only to God. God is the Supreme Being,—most perfect, infinite, the Creator. All creation is but a participation of His perfection. That man should see traces of God's perfection in the created things of this world, and through his veneration of them render worship to the Maker, is not incongruous, for any intelligent person knows that the veneration which is shown to these persons or things, is shown to them in a far lesser degree than to the Creator Himself, either because of their participation in His divine perfections, or because of their close association with the Divinity. St. Thomas teaches that, "Reverence is due to God on account of His excellence, which is communicated to certain creatures not in equal measure but according to a measure of proportion; so that the reverence which we pay to God, . . . differs from the reverence which we pay to certain excellent creatures."² And quoting St. Augustine in the same article, he says, "Many tokens of divine worship are employed in doing honor to men, . . . yet so that those to whom these honors are given are recognized as being men to whom we owe esteem and reverence. . . . But whoever thought it his duty to sacrifice to any other than one whom he either knew or deemed or pretended to be a

¹ *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 84, a. 2.

² *Op. cit.*, a. 1 ad lam.

God?" St. Thomas further exemplifies his statement when he tells us "that it was with the reverence due to an excellent creature that Nathan adored David; while it was the reverence due to God with which Mardocheaus refused to adore Aman fearing lest he should transfer the honor of his God to man."

In order to understand the Catholic doctrine concerning the worship of saints or images, it is necessary first of all to understand the various kinds of worship that theologians distinguish. The highest type, adoration in the strictest sense, is called *latria*, a Greek theological term which signifies the adoration due only to God, and which cannot be communicated to any other being. To the saints is given the worship of *dulia*, which specifies the particular type of worship given to the saints. This worship is given to them not in virtue of their uncreated excellence, for such is God's excellence, but because of their sharing in such an eminent degree in the gifts of grace and glory in God. Strictly speaking we do not adore the saints, or even the Blessed Virgin Mary; we venerate, honor, or reverence them, but adoration in the strict sense is due only to God. *Hyperdulia* is a special worship, above that of *dulia*, yet far below that of *latria*. It is reserved to the Blessed Virgin on account of her supereminent and singular position in the Divine Plan, as Mother of God, and as having in the highest possible degree for a human being the gifts of grace and glory, and because she manifests in a more sublime manner the excellence and goodness of God. She, in virtue of her purity and sanctity, and especially of her prerogative as Mother of Jesus Christ, is worthy of the highest and most exalted place that a creature can aspire to in heaven; for, because of the abundance of grace which she received from God, "Hail full of grace," and her wonderful and humble correspondence with these graces, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word," she has reached a degree of glory above all the angels and saints, but she will always remain a creature. Indeed like all other creatures she is far inferior to God, but highest among creatures. God is adored as Creator of all things; she is venerated as the greatest of God's saints.

The saints are God's chosen friends. They have lived a life of holiness and received the reward offered to those who follow in the footsteps of the Master. According to the Church's doctrine of the "Communion of Saints," they are still part of the Church; they are still united to us. The whole Church is

composed of the Church Triumphant, that is, the saints and blessed in heaven; the Church Militant, the just in this "vale of tears;" and the Church Suffering, that is the souls in purgatory. The saints in heaven have reached their goal, eternal happiness. They have not need of prayer in their own behalf, but their charity prompts them to intercede for us sinners here below to obtain the grace and aid that one day we may be united with them in their eternal happiness, just as we, members of the Church Militant, pray for the souls in purgatory that they may be delivered from their suffering when they have paid the price of their negligence on earth. St. Peter tells us that "the devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour," and "if hate impells the demons to ruin us, surely love must inspire the angels to help us; and if the angels, though of a different nature than ours, are so mindful to help us, as we know from Scripture, how much more interest do the saints manifest in our welfare, who are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh?"³

Prayer is offered to a person either that it may be fulfilled by him, or that he may obtain the realization of a desire or request from one who can grant it. In the first way we offer prayer to God alone, and in the second way we pray to the angels and the saints, not that God will know our petitions through them, but that our prayers may be effective through the prayers and merits of the saints interceding for us. When we pray to God we ask Him to "have mercy on us," while we ask the saints to "pray for us." This is the manner employed by the Church in her approved liturgical prayers. No one would think of saying "St. Thomas, have mercy on us" in the sense that he could relieve our miseries and grant our petitions of his own power. If such an expression were used, the intention of the Catholic would be, without a doubt, that of beseeching the saint to take pity on us in our need; it would be but a more ardent expression seeking the intercession of the saint in our behalf.

There are people outside the Church who ridicule Catholic devotion to the saints. Yet these same persons would not dare approach the president or a king to beg a favor without the intervention or help of a third party,—and sometimes more, one who is intimately connected with the president. To approach the president personally would be possible, but they consider it far more advantageous to their welfare to approach him

³ James Cardinal Gibbons, *Faith of Fathers*, Chap. XIII.

through one of his intimates, who in all probability will obtain their request. Catholics in their devotion to the saints do the same thing. When a saintly person dies, death takes from him merely his body. His soul cannot die; it must live forever. But his soul contains his reason, his will, his memory, all his intellectual faculties, and consequently when he departs this life he does not forget us. Rather he is in a far better position to help us than when he struggled along with us in this life. When we leave this life we are not without membership in the "Communion of Saints," unless of ourselves we have merited to be ejected. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Consequently, after death the saints are more closely united to Him and in a far better position to pray to Him. St. James in his Epistle tells us to pray for one another. And since the saints are so close to the King of Kings is it not reasonable that we, struggling to attain the reward promised to us, should ask them to pray for us?

Indeed, we should adore God alone, but that does not prevent us from honoring and venerating those whom God has honored. When the president pins the Distinguished Service Medal on a citizen in token of his appreciated benefits to humanity, are we finished honoring him? Quite the contrary, and all the honor which we give to this hero in no way detracts from that which is due and which we give to the president. Through life this citizen is honored in person, and after death statues, monuments, memorials are erected to commemorate his deeds, to perpetuate his name; people of the present and succeeding generations are not satisfied until they have travelled long distances to see these monuments and shrines; they eagerly hunt for souvenirs and worthless trinkets, which in some way have come in contact with this hero, and preserve them with the utmost care and veneration. On his natal day, or on another befitting occasion, his statues and shrines are covered with garlands, people pay their respect with uncovered heads, bands serenade, parades are formed, services are held, all in honor of this hero. Yet the most humble man will understand that all these manifestations were not directed to the statues and shrines but to the hero himself. This gives us some idea of the Catholic worship of images.

In the earlier part of this paper we divided worship into *latria*, *dulia*, and *hyperdulia*, that is, the adoration due to God alone, to the saints, and the Blessed Virgin respectively. Each

of these three species of adoration may be *relative* or *absolute*. The absolute adoration is that which we give to God or the saints directly, whereas relative, as the term implies, is the adoration which we give to God or the saints indirectly through their images or representations. If people stopped to consider what an image is, and their own manifestations of respect towards the statues and pictures of heroes, they would be somewhat reluctant to calumniate Catholics and their worship. The ordinary dictionary defines an image as a visible representation or a similitude of any person or thing. An image may be considered inasmuch as it is a *thing*, that is, stone or wood; or it may be considered precisely as an *image*. In the first manner there could be no reverence, for reverence is due only to a rational creature. Honor is shown to an image in so far as it is an image, and such homage is only relative. To the image, as an *image*, is given the reverence which we would give to the person but only in a relative manner. A Catholic knows that the honor which he gives to an image is referred to the prototype; to be sure, he knows that the figure of stone or wood has no power to hear his prayer, even as those who accuse Catholics of idolotry know that the picture of a loving father or mother, or of some hero, before which they often stand and address their thoughts, cannot hear or answer them, and yet they continue to honor these pictures.

The Catholic reverence and veneration of relics contains nothing unusual or superstitious about it. Outside the sphere of religion the instinct of man to preserve all that has had any connection with the one honored and revered is most common and laudable. The Nation preserves the home and its furnishings, the very clothes of its father, George Washington. The museums of the world preserve with the greatest care and veneration the crowns, the robes, the wearing apparel, the rings, the swords, etc., of kings and queens, statesmen and heroes. Why therefore should Catholics be questioned for their veneration of the relics of those who have served their Master faithfully in this life and are now enjoying that heavenly happiness of being with Him in His Eternal Kingdom? The body and parts of the body, because they belong to human nature, are more intimately and closely united to us than mere garments. God Himself honors the relics of His saints by working miracles through their presence. Catholics know that the bodies of the

saints have no power of their own to heal, to cure, to work miracles. The honor does not stop at the lifeless piece of clay but is referred to the living, immortal soul which once occupied the body. The practise is not superstitious because Catholics do not suppose any intrinsic efficacy in the relic which would cause it to work a miracle. Catholics know that no one, save God alone, can by personal power perform a miracle. In the words of St. Jerome, "We do not worship, we do not adore for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the Creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore Him whose martyrs they are."⁴

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, IIa, q. 25, a. 6, ad 1am.

