

IMAGES AND VENERATION DUE TO THEM

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AS old as humanity itself is that noble impulse dictating to mankind the need, the importance and the consolations of religion. Never was there a time in the history of the world when this impulse was completely stifled or obliterated. True it is, certain forms of religion may have been crude, bordering on the absurd, and, too frequently, cruel and unmerciful in their ritual demands, nevertheless the fact remains—religion in some form or other always existed. We would ask man to do the impossible if we asked him to suppress his religious instincts. He may change his views in regard to the object of his religion, but it is impossible for him not to express his religious feelings toward some goal. Money, power or any other base motive may be his god, yet he still maintains religion—that urge to adore and serve someone or something.

As we well know, the acme of religious perfection is reached when man feels convinced that there exists an Almighty, Merciful and Just Being. Upon this Being the soul of man lavishes its homage, respect and love; offers thanks in times of triumph, and humbly implores assistance in time of sorrow. Yes, when man becomes conscious of a Supreme Being and recognizes Him as the Creator and the Sustainer of things visible and invisible, he is religious.

Yet man is human and consequently more or less absorbed with material things. He is conscious of his obligation to adore and fill this obligation. And why? Because it is not an easy matter and render thanks, but very frequently he finds it difficult to fulfill to keep his mind consistently bent upon an unseen God, and to meditate upon the things that really count. To accomplish this, some external and invisible helps are indispensable. Realizing this great need, the Catholic Church was not content merely in telling people that they must adore God, but she pointed out the way and the method. Besides her doctrine and sacraments, she brought into use other helps enabling man to carry out his reli-

gious ideals. She sanctioned the use of images and statues, means that would serve as reminders and go far toward furthering and completing the religious devotion of her children. Why, one may ask, did the Church make use of such a practice? Was not her available equipment sufficient? Yes, it was sufficient, but its sufficiency was strengthened by the use of images. When the Catholic Church gave her approval to the use of images, she succeeded in reaching even the unlettered who could learn the various mysteries of religion depicted on wood, stone and canvas, just as the theologian might learn them from his books. The prayer in stone became a reality when images came into their own.

That images of Our Saviour, the Blessed Virgin and the Saints have been in use since the earliest days of Christianity is a fact that no one can deny. When the persecuted Christians of the first centuries were forced to hide and worship in the catacombs, they began to decorate these gloomy caverns with representations of Our Lord's life. Later on when they openly practised their religion they took the abandoned temples of paganism and adorned them with statues and crosses. When the mighty cathedrals of Europe came into being, the use of images for their adornment and inspiration to devotion became the universal rule. All this time Catholics, for the greater part, perfectly understood the veneration and respect due to these images.

However, in some of the Eastern Churches this honor and veneration increased to an excessive degree. We read that prostrations, incensings, litanies and long prayers were offered before the images. The result of this excess was a natural revulsion to image worship. It became so bitter and so strong as to find expression in the famous heresy of the Iconoclasts—an attempt to root out all use and veneration of images in Christian Churches. As usual, the attempted reformation was ill-advised and went to the opposite extreme. At this juncture the Church once and for all, through the decrees of the Second Nicene Council, laid down certain rules governing the use and veneration of images. Gradually the heresy died out and images once more came into their own.

A temporary interruption in the use of images was brought about by the zealous reformers of Protestantism. Filled with hatred for a reminder of the faith they abandoned, they ruthlessly destroyed many of the priceless carvings, statues and

windows of the ancient churches of Europe. Yet later on we find even in Protestant circles a return to the use of images. The carven altars, the glowing windows, the crosses and statues of the Anglican churches bear solemn testimony that the human mind needs such outward helps for the furthering of religious devotion.

So much for the use and existence of these exterior helps. Let us now turn to their position as things worthy of our veneration. Should we venerate them? If we should, just how far must this veneration go? In order to answer this, we must set forth some very definite principles governing the matters of adoration and worship.

In a broad sense, the Latin word *cultus* or *adoratio* (in English: adoration, veneration, reverence, cult, worship) denotes a more or less high degree of honor given to some individual in virtue of some superior excellence. There are three species of this *cultus* or adoration. The first is called *latria*, which is adoration in the strict sense rendered to Almighty God in virtue of His uncreated excellence. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost are the only Persons we adore. Our adoration of them is supreme and consists in total submission to Their Holy Will. The second species is called *hyperdulia*, which is not adoration properly so called, but a veneration or reverence paid to the Blessed Virgin in virtue of her privilege as the most exalted and holiest of creatures. The third species is called *dulia*, which consists in honor and reverence manifested to creatures in virtue of their supernatural excellence in the way of grace and glory.

Each of these three species may be absolute or relative. Absolute, when the adoration or veneration is bestowed upon the person because of some intrinsic excellence, something given to him for his own sake. Our adoration before the Blessed Sacrament is absolute; recognition of Almighty God as the Creator and Provider is also absolute adoration. If we could see the Blessed Virgin or the Saints in person we would offer them an absolute veneration. The cult is relative when it is paid to a sign or image, not at all for its own sake, but for the sake of the thing signified.

That images of Our Lord, of the Blessed Virgin and of the Saints merit more than a passing veneration and respect is most evident from the decrees of the Second Nicene Council. In reply to the Iconoclasts, this council decreed: "We define with all certainty and care that both the figure of the sacred cross and the

venerable and holy images are to be placed suitably in the churches of God and in houses; that is to say, the images of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our Immaculate Lady, the Holy Mother of God, and of the Angels and Saints. For as often as they are seen in these representations, those who look at them are ardently lifted up to the memory and love of the originals and are induced to give them respect and worshipful honor. So that offerings of incense and lights are to be given to the images, to the figure of the life-giving Cross, to the Holy books of the Gospels and to other sacred objects, in order to do them honor. For honor paid to an image passes on to the one represented by it; he who venerates an image venerates the reality of him portrayed in it." Later the Council of Trent states: "Images of Christ, the Virgin Mother of God and other Saints are to be held and kept especially in churches. Due honor and veneration are to be paid to them, not that any divinity or power is in them to entitle them to be worshipped, or that anything can be asked of them, or that any trust may be put in them, but because the honor shown to them is referred to those whom they represent; so that by kissing, uncovering to, or kneeling before images we adore Christ and honor the Saints."

With these principles and teachings of the Church in view, let us consider the veneration due to images.

St. Thomas¹ asks if the images of Christ should be adored with an adoration of latria. According to him, the veneration offered to an image is of the same species as that offered to the prototype, with the exception that it is relative while the prototype receives an absolute veneration. Christ as God is adored and worshipped with latria. Therefore His image, not as a thing but as a representation of Christ, is worshipped with latria. Furthermore, the cult offered to the image is just as true and as real as the one offered to the exemplar. For when we pay our homage to the image of Christ, our marks of respect and devotion do not terminate in the material image itself, but are conveyed by means of this image to Christ Himself.

Acting on this principle, we can conclude that the veneration we give to a statue or image of the Blessed Virgin is one of hyperdulia in the relative sense. Her image merits a veneration of hyperdulia since she herself as the greatest of all God's creatures merits such a veneration. The homage, on the other

¹Summa Theologica. IIIa. Q. 25. Art. 3.

hand, that we pay to the images and statues of the saints is one of relative dulia, since the saints as creatures possessing an abundance of supernatural goods merit such veneration.

Catholics are bitterly criticised at times for their apparent folly in venerating images. Yet in reality the practice is a reasonable one. We render respect and homage to other lifeless things because they symbolize something we love or reverence. An American citizen will proudly salute the flag of his country, and bare his head when the national hymn is played within his hearing. He is ever ready to risk life and property to avenge an insult offered to his flag. Now if such respect is reasonable—and who will assert that it is not—why should it be unreasonable to manifest it towards a portrait of Our Saviour or of a holy Saint of God?