



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

January/February 1991

ADORATION

Adoration is that special kind of prayer in which we renounce all activity in order to be in God's presence. We recognize God as God, and ourselves as His creatures and adopted children. The problem is that we tend to think of adoration as an extra credit option in our prayer life. It is something that the "professionally religious" do -- monks and nuns and clergy -- but not something that is expected of normal laity. With all the responsibilities of a full Christian prayer life -- the daily office, the Eucharist, meditation, intercession, almsgiving, service, fasting, charitable works, the cultivation of virtue and the battle with temptation, each challenging in its own right! -- there hardly seems to be time or energy left for adoration.

Moreover, adoration seems to be without a focus. Nothing happens. We do not share our deepest concerns with God, nor do we try to hear His answer to our questions. It lacks the active participation of the Eucharist, where the bread and wine become for us the Body and Blood of Christ, and where we come physically as well as spiritually to receive the Holy Communion. By contrast, it seems as though nothing really happens in adoration. Is this experience just self-delusion or wishful thinking? Is it not just a waste of time? Since so often nothing seems to happen, we are afraid that we are avoiding our real responsibilities when we put time and effort into adoration. It offends against our pragmatic nature.

Even if we agree that it is somehow worthwhile, adoration takes considerable effort. We are not sure how to do it. We are not even sure how to tell if we are succeeding, when we do attempt it.

So there are rather considerable reasons for resisting adoration in favor of other kinds of prayer and Christian activity. And yet, there are also problems with this devaluation of adora-

ion. After all, our Lord's example of prayer begins, "Our Father, ... hallowed be thy name." It begins with adoration of the Father. Knowing that Jesus was a practical man, this should give us pause, lest we write off adoration as something unsuited to the practical life of ordinary people.

The basic reason that adoration is important (indeed, central) to our Christian lives is that it is a type of prayer centered upon God. All prayer centers on God, of course, but when we are asking for things for ourselves or for others, it is easy to become focused on the petitions rather than on God. To some extent, such is unavoidable. When presenting a petition to God we must think of two things: the petition as well as the One we are asking. Since the goal of Christian life is a life centered not on self but on God, we need to try to work on keeping our prayer centered on Him. Adoration will help us to do this.

Adoration is rather hard to describe, since it is not an action in the usual sense of the term. It is more a matter of being than of doing. For when we adore, we renounce activity, even the activity of prayer -- asking or actively meditating, for example. We place ourselves in the presence of God, and center ourselves upon Him, praising, loving, being with Him. This requires some effort, of course! The mind races on; parts of our being fidget from the enforced stillness. It takes practice and the training of the will. This means that adoration is a kind of non-acting action: an act of will, but willing to give up activity in order to be purely receptive.

Only thus can adoration be centered on God -- and only when it is centered on God is it truly adoration. We open ourselves to Him. When we adore, we offer all that we are in the worship of God. It is a matter of self-offering. It is also a matter of forgetting ourselves in the Presence of God. We so open ourselves to God that He overtakes our consciousness of ourselves. He fills us, so that we no longer regard our own concerns as ultimate. The Other becomes more important than self, at least for a moment or two. God does this not by brute force or tyranny, but simply by the power of His love for us. When we open ourselves to His love, God gives it to us so far as we are able to receive it. It does not override our freedom or our personality, but rather fulfills them. Ironically we are more ourselves when we are full of God rather than full of self. Adoration is the means by which we allow God to fill us.

It is also the essence of a true relationship with God. God, because He is God and not just another human, is worthy of being adored. He is our superior, and we ought not to relate to Him as if He were our equal or inferior. (He condescends to relate to us as a brother in the person of Jesus, but this wondrous humility should make us regard Him the more highly, not take Him for granted.) In our egalitarian society -- without kings or nobility -- it is sometimes hard for us to conceive of such a

personal relationship which is not between two people of essential equality, even if one is boss and the other worker. In the relationship of inequality, it is the superior one who must establish the relationship, for the inferior would be presumptuous to do so.

Thus in our relationship with God, we accept that He has taken the initiative in establishing a relationship, and desiring us to love Him and know Him. While it may be hard for us to imagine that the almighty God might be interested in each one of us, that is nevertheless exactly the message of the Gospel. In accepting His care for us, we acknowledge our position of dependence, and try to live in thankfulness for His love.

This attitude leads us to adore Him. Adoration is rooted in the love and gratitude of an inferior for the unwarranted care given by One who is greater. It is an expression of the love we have for God. In fact, about the only time (apart from our relationship with God) that we speak of adoration is in the context of our greatest loves: "I adore my wife." There is hardly a more emphatic statement of love.

To adore God we must both know Him and love Him. We love Him in gratitude for all that He has given us: for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life. We love Him particularly for having made us worthy to worship Him. Apart from His act in putting away our sins and establishing a relationship between Himself and us, we would not be worthy to worship in any way. Rather than presume to adore Him even privately, we would hide our faces in shame before His majesty. We can and want to love Him because He first loved us. Our love is the reflection of His love for us. His elicits ours.

If we are to adore God we must also know Him, both in His transcendent majesty and in His approachable imminence. Both are essential to His nature. He is God of gods and Lord of lords, dwelling in light inaccessible, Creator of all things and having authority over all. We will misunderstand Him if we forget His divine majesty. And yet at the same time, He wills to be accessible to us. In the person of Jesus, God shows us a human face. He reveals Himself to us, and bids us approach. He is not just distant and infinitely superior; He is also near and ready to be familiar. He is a Person and wishes us to know Him as a Person.

We can never exhaust the knowledge of God; there is always something more to be known -- this keeps our relationship with Him from ever being boring! The knowledge which is the basis of adoration comes to us in two ways. We know God as He is revealed in Scripture, and in our individual experience of His love in our hearts. Both are necessary. For Scripture gives us the objective knowledge of God as He wills to reveal Himself. It is trustworthy, and serves as a corrective to our individual bias and blindness. It keeps us in touch with God as He really is and not as we would like Him to be. Without our submission to the authority of

Scripture, we are apt to be misled by our individual religious experiences -- since our imagination, emotions and reason are all fallen.

But the objective revelation of Scripture is not sufficient by itself either: for it could easily remain objective -- in the head and not in the heart. Scripture is to lead us to faith, to the intimacy of a relationship with God in the heart: to know Him as a person, and to allow ourselves to be known personally by Him. We are to know Him in such a way that we love Him.

With such knowledge -- both head and heart -- we adore Him. In adoring Him we also come to a greater knowledge of Him, both experientially and in our deeper understanding of Scripture in the light of our adoration. It is a two-way street. Knowing God we are led to adore Him. Adoring Him increases in us the knowledge of God.

Adoration is an essential part of Christian life, the "good part of Mary" (see the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42). Since it is more a matter of being than of doing, adoration runs afoul of our activist culture, as well as our activist pride (we are proud of our ability to do things for ourselves). But Christianity is also more a matter of being than of doing: what we do matters because it is a reflection of who we are. It is God's act that gets us into heaven rather than any of our own. We receive the blessings of God's act of salvation when we live out faithful lives.

The regular practice of adoration helps us remember this, and to remain focused on our being with God rather than on all the things we have to do or want to do or think we ought to do. It centers us on God and His actions, rather than on our own.

All too often, we find our prayer lives frustrating and unfruitful because we order them incorrectly. We start with petition and intercession, or perhaps with confession and penitence. Then we go on to thanksgivings, and perhaps have a little time at the end for adoration. We begin with our needs, perhaps feeling that we must get these things out of the way before we can really pay attention to God. Understandable though this is, the priority is wrong. We ought to follow the example Jesus has given us in the Lord's Prayer, and begin with adoration, even if it is only for a moment. This puts God first. It acknowledges that even our most pressing needs pale before His majesty. It accepts (and celebrates) our position of dependence. It makes our praise of Him more than an afterthought. It allows us to proceed to petition and intercession and all the rest with the proper foundation. And then (again, after Jesus' example) we should return to adoration at the end of our prayer, praising God not just for what He has done but for who He is.