

Homage to Christ

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Yesterday, I preached on what it means for us to *honor* the Blessed Virgin Mary and how it differs from worshipping God. Today, the Feast of the Epiphany, gives us the perfect opportunity to look more closely at what it means to worship and adore God. First, I'm going to present the theological difference between honoring and worshipping and then we'll look at some of the practical aspects of our adoration and worship of God.

Our Gospel reading today gives us a beautiful image of worship and adoration when the magi from the East offered "homage" to the newborn Christ. The Greek word that is translated "homage" in this passage is προσκυνέω (pros-koo-neh'-o), which means a gesture of reverence that respects an *unequal role or ranking*. Within the first four centuries of the Church, theologians worked out a distinction for this type of reverence so that it would not be confused with the reverence that we offer to the saints.

Saint Augustine seems to be the source of the clear distinction regarding reverence for God—as manifested in adoration and worship—verses reverence for people—as manifested in our honoring of the saints. In his famous work, The City of God, Saint Augustine wrote that there are two kinds of reverence, "one which is due to men . . . which in Greek is called *dulia*; the other, *latria*, which is the service pertaining to the worship of God" (St. Thomas II-II:103:3).¹ Theologians in the Church have further indicated that the difference between our reverence for other human beings and our reverence for God is not merely a difference in *degree*, but is *fundamentally* different. In other words, the honor we give to Mary and the Saints is as different from the worship we give to God as creation is different from the Creator.

The reverence that we give to God, *latria*², is one of *sacrifice*. In the beginning of the Israelites' relationship with God, they mistakenly thought that the best way to reverence and worship Him was through animal and grain sacrifices. After centuries, God made it clear through the prophets that He was not interested in the sacrifice of animals and grain. Two great examples of this are found in the first book of Samuel and Psalm 50—

Does the Lord so delight in holocausts and sacrifices as in obedience to the command of the Lord? Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission than the fat of rams.

--1 Samuel 15:22

I need no bullock from your house, no goats from your fold.
For every animal of the forest is mine, beasts by the thousands on my mountains.
I know every bird of the heavens; the creatures of the field belong to me.
Were I hungry, I would not tell you, for mine is the world and all that fills it.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?
Offer praise as your sacrifice to God; fulfill your vows to the Most High.

--Psalm 50:9-14

¹ A further distinction has sometimes been made between the reverence given to Mary and the reverence given to the saints, with the word *hyperdulia* referring to the reverence given to Mary and *dulia* referring to the reverence given to the rest of the saints. In this case, it is a distinction in *degree*, not in *type*.

² *Latria* literally means "the state of a hired servant." See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09036a.htm> for more.

While the reverence that we show to the saints is one of honor, the reverence we are to show to God is one of sacrificial worship. The former is most commonly shown through our requests for the saints' intercession and our interest in modeling their faith, hope and love. The practical aspects of our reverence for God is that He doesn't desire animal and grain sacrifices, nor does He need gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but He desires our praise and faithfulness. We reverence God when we praise Him in gratitude for what He has done for us and Who He is for us. We also reverence God when we faithfully live out the vocation He has called us to and grow in love. Another way of saying this is—we reverence God when we choose to live as the unique and particular image of Jesus Christ that He created us to be. Such adoration is not merely "honoring" God, but it is truly sacrificial worship!

This week, as we celebrate the Epiphany of Christ, let's look for opportunities to reverence and worship our God, not with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but with the gift of our very selves.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Read Matthew 2:1-12. What are some of the ways that you reverence God and worship Him? What are the greatest gifts that you can bring to Christ right now in your life?