

The word “worship” has undergone a change in meaning in English. It comes from the Old English *weorthscipe*, which means the condition of being worthy of honor, respect, or dignity. To worship in the older, larger sense is to ascribe honor, worth, or excellence to someone, whether a sage, a magistrate, or God.

For many centuries, the term *worship* simply meant showing respect or honor, and an example of this usage survives in contemporary English. British subjects refer to their magistrates as “Your Worship,” although Americans would say “Your Honor.” This doesn’t mean that British subjects worship their magistrates as gods (in fact, they may even despise a particular magistrate they are addressing). It means they are giving them the honor appropriate to their office, not the honor appropriate to God.

Outside of this example, however, the English term “worship” has been narrowed in scope to indicate only that supreme form of honor, reverence, and respect that is due to God. This change in usage is quite recent. In fact, one can still find books that use “worship” in the older, broader sense. This can lead to a significant degree of confusion, when people who are familiar only with the use of words in their own day and their own circles encounter material written in other times and other places.

In Scripture, the term “worship” was similarly broad in meaning, but in the early Christian centuries, theologians began to differentiate between different types of honor in order to make more clear which is due to God and which is not.

As the terminology of Christian theology developed, the Greek term *latría* came to be used to refer to the honor that is due to God alone, and the term *dulia* came to refer to the honor that is due to human beings, especially those who lived and died in God’s friendship—in other words, the saints. Scripture indicates that honor is due to these individuals (Matt. 10:41b). A special term was coined to refer to the special honor given to the Virgin Mary, who bore Jesus—God in the flesh—in her womb. This term, *hyperdulia* (*hyper* [more than]+ *dulia* = “beyond *dulia*”), indicates that the honor due to her as Christ’s own

Mother is more than the *dulia* given to other saints. It is greater in degree, but still of the same kind. However, since Mary is a finite creature, the honor she is due is fundamentally different in kind from the *latría* owed to the infinite Creator.

All of these terms—*latría*, *dulia*, *hyperdulia*—used to be lumped under the one English word “worship.” Sometimes when one reads old books discussing the subject of how particular persons are to be honored, they will qualify the word “worship” by referring to “the worship of *latría*” or “the worship of *dulia*.” To contemporaries and to those not familiar with the history of these terms, however, this is too confusing.

Another attempt to make clear the difference between the honor due to God and that due to humans has been to use the words *adore* and *adoration* to describe the total, consuming reverence due to God and the terms *venerate*, *veneration*, and *honor* to refer to the respect due humans. Thus, Catholics sometimes say, “We *adore* God but we *honor* his saints.”

Unfortunately, many non-Catholics have been so schooled in hostility toward the Church that they appear unable or unwilling to recognize these distinctions. They confidently (often arrogantly) assert that Catholics “worship” Mary and the saints, and, in so doing, commit idolatry. This is patently false, of course, but the education in anti-Catholic prejudice is so strong that one must patiently explain that Catholics *do not* worship anyone but God—at least given the contemporary use of the term. The Church is very strict about the fact that *latría*, adoration—what contemporary English speakers call “worship”—is to be given *only* to God.

Though one should know it from one’s own background, it often may be best to simply point out that Catholics do not worship anyone but God and omit discussing the history of the term. Many non-Catholics might be more perplexed than enlightened by hearing the history of the word. Familiar only with *their group’s* use of the term “worship,” they may misperceive a history lesson as rationalization and end up even more adamant in their declarations that the term is applicable only to God. They may

even go further. Wanting to attack the veneration of the saints, they may declare that *only* God should be honored.

Both of these declarations are in direct contradiction to the language and precepts of the Bible. The term “worship” was used in the same way in the Bible that it used to be used in English. It could cover both the adoration given to God alone and the honor that is to be shown to certain human beings. In Hebrew, the term for worship is *shakhhah*. It is appropriately used for humans in a large number of passages.

For example, in Genesis 37:7–9 Joseph relates two dreams that God gave him concerning how his family would honor him in coming years. Translated literally the passage states: “[B]ehold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and worshiped [*shakhhah*] my sheaf.” . . . Then he dreamed another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were worshipping [*shakhhah*] me.”

In Genesis 49:2–27, Jacob pronounced a prophetic blessing on his sons, and concerning Judah he stated: “Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons shall worship [*shakhhah*] you (49:8).” And in Exodus 18:7, Moses honored his father-in-law, Jethro: “Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and worshiped [*shakhhah*] him and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare, and went into the tent.”

Yet none of these passages were discussing the worship of adoration, the kind of worship given to God.

## HONORING SAINTS

Consider how honor is given. We regularly give it to public officials. In the United States it is customary to address a judge as “Your Honor.” In the marriage ceremony it used to be said that the wife would “love, honor, and obey” her husband. Letters to legislators are addressed to “The Honorable So-and-So.” And just about anyone, living or dead, who bears an ex-

alted rank is said to be worthy of honor, and this is particularly true of historical figures, as when children are (or at least used to be) instructed to honor the Founding Fathers of America.

These practices are entirely Biblical. We are explicitly commanded at numerous points in the Bible to honor certain people. One of the most important commands on this subject is the command to honor one’s parents: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Ex. 20:12). God considered this command so important that he repeated it multiple times in the Bible (for example, Lev. 19:3; Deut. 5:16; Matt. 15:4; Luke 18:20; and Eph. 6:2–3). It was also important to give honor to one’s elders in general: “You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:32). It was also important to specially honor religious leaders: “Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron [the high priest], to give him dignity and honor” (Ex. 28:2).

The New Testament stresses the importance of honoring others no less than the Old Testament. The apostle Paul commanded: “Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due” (Rom. 13:7). He also stated this as a principle regarding one’s employers: “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ” (Eph. 6:5). “Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed” (1 Tim. 6:1). Perhaps the broadest command to honor others is found in 1 Peter: “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Pet. 2:17).

The New Testament also stresses the importance of honoring religious figures. Paul spoke of the need to give them special honor in 1 Timothy: “Let the presbyters [priests] who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). Christ him-

self promised special blessings to those who honor religious figures: "He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, and he who receives a righteous man [saint] because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward" (Matt. 10:41).

So, if there can be nothing wrong with honoring the living, who still have an opportunity to ruin their lives through sin, there certainly can be no argument against giving honor to saints whose lives are done and who ended them in sanctity. If people should be honored in general, God's special friends certainly should be honored.

### STATUE WORSHIP?

People who do not know better sometimes say that Catholics worship statues. Not only is this untrue, it is even untrue that Catholics honor statues. After all, a statue is nothing but a carved block of marble or a chunk of plaster, and no one gives honor to marble yet unquarried or to plaster still in the mixing bowl.

The fact that someone kneels before a statue to pray does not mean that he is praying *to* the statue, just as the fact that someone kneels with a Bible in his hands to pray does not mean that he is worshipping the Bible. Statues or paintings or other artistic devices are used to recall to the mind the person or thing depicted. Just as it is easier to remember one's mother by looking at her photograph, so it is easier to recall the lives of the saints by looking at representations of them.

The use of statues and icons for liturgical purposes (as opposed to idols) also had a place in the Old Testament. In Exodus 25:18–20, God commanded: "And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end; of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be."

In Numbers 21:8–9, he told Moses: "'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live." This shows the actual ceremonial use of a statue (looking to it) in order to receive a blessing from God (healing from snakebite). In John 3:14, Jesus tells us that he himself is what the bronze serpent represented, so it was a symbolic representation of Jesus. There was no problem with this statue—God had commanded it to be made—so long as people did not worship it. When they did, the righteous king Hezekiah had it destroyed (2 Kgs. 18:4). This clearly shows the difference between the proper religious use of statues and idolatry.

When the time came to build the Temple in Jerusalem, God inspired David's plans for it, which included "his plan for the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the LORD. All this he made clear by the writing from the hand of the LORD concerning it, all the work to be done according to the plan" (1 Chr. 28:18–19).

In obedience to this divinely inspired plan, Solomon built two gigantic, golden statues of cherubim: "In the most holy place he made two cherubim of wood and overlaid them with gold. The wings of the cherubim together extended twenty cubits: one wing of the one, of five cubits, touched the wall of the house, and its other wing, of five cubits, touched the wing of the other cherub; and of this cherub, one wing, of five cubits, touched the wall of the house, and the other wing, also of five cubits, was joined to the wing of the first cherub. The wings of these cherubim extended twenty cubits; the cherubim stood on their feet, facing the nave. And he made the veil of blue and purple and crimson fabrics and fine linen, and worked cherubim on it" (2 Chr. 3:10–14).

(See the Catholic Answers tract, *Do Catholics Worship Statues?* for further information.)

### IMITATION IS THE BIBLICAL FORM OF HONOR

The most important form of honoring the saints, to which all the other forms are related, is the imitation of them in their relationship with God. Paul wrote extensively about the importance of spiritual imitation. He stated: "I urge you, then, be imitators of me. Therefore I sent to you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:16–17). Later he told the same group: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:1–2). The author of the book of Hebrews also stresses the importance of imitating true spiritual leaders: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7).

One of the most important passages on imitation is found in Hebrews. Chapter 11 of that book, the Bible's well-known "hall of fame" chapter, presents numerous examples of the Old Testament saints for our imitation. It concludes with the famous exhortation: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (12:1)—the race that the saints have run before us.

NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.  
Bernadeane Carr, STL, 10 August 2004

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permission to publish this work is hereby granted.  
+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, 10 August 2004

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## Mary & the Saints

### SAINT WORSHIP

