
Popular Devotions and Theology

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Two inseparable elements

It would not be fair to say that theologians in general pay much attention to the popular devotions of the faithful. Yet these popular devotions in recent years have been the subject of much barren erudition and many unintelligible arguments under the cover of modern theology. In fact, many of the articles by Catholic publications nowadays appear distant and unfamiliar to the average reader—not because of any particular depth of thought, but because they are motivated by a destructive spirit of revisionism, eager to strike renovating hammer blows on the faith and morals handed down to us through the centuries. Having abandoned the moderation and linguistic precision of traditional theology, the writers of these articles employ a terminology that is often odd and many times unclear. Add to this the style of a polemicist, and it is not difficult to understand why the reader, far from being edified and encouraged in his faith, is led to feel bewildered and, at times, even cheated.

Catholics who have always been faithful members of the Church are now supposed to feel guilty—not of personal sins they may have committed (modern theologians are very accommodating on this point)—but of the hypocrisy and fanaticism of some devotional practices which are said to be degrading—the use of holy water, the rosary, novenas, etc. As a result, many Catholics fall under the sad impression that the type of piety which believers have practiced for centuries belongs to an unfortunate era, and should be brought to a quick end for the good of the Church.

There are some other Catholics, however, who take such pronouncements with a grain of salt and continue as always, the only difference being that, from then on, they are inclined to mistrust theologians en bloc. Both attitudes are harmful to the Church, and reveal a lack of balance between two important elements in the spiritual life of a Christian: prayer, and theological knowledge; or, in other words, between a simple and filial devotion on one hand, and a rational organization of Christian doctrine on the other. Each element implies the other, and as such they should coexist in perfect harmony, the conditions being that the doctrine must contain no error, and piety must be free of deformations.

An analysis of the relationship between theology and the life of piety should help uncover the root of the apparent incoherence of certain theological approaches to the traditional devotions of the Christian faithful.

Prayerful theology

The role of theology cannot possibly be to destroy piety among the people, or to establish any difference between a hypothetical “Church of the masses” and its own “Church of the elite.” The services that theology has rendered to the faith and devotion of Christians are so obvious that no examples need to be quoted. Good theologians have always been personally devout and have constantly encouraged piety. They themselves have estimated their own theological learning as much less valuable and important than their life of prayer, or their acts of faith and love. Intelligent theologians abide by Thomas à Kempis’ golden rule: “I

would rather feel contrition than know how to define it.” St. Thomas Aquinas sang to the Blessed Sacrament hymns that rose from the innermost depths of his soul touched by his ardent devotion to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. Francis Suarez used to say that he thought more of a well-prayed Hail Mary than of having written all his volumes on metaphysics. The doctrine taught by the great Catholic theologians is the doctrine of the Church, a doctrine which has been practiced by men and women of all ages and of all walks of life, and which has always had an outlet in the form of external devotional practices.

Without a life of prayer, efforts at attaining a deeper knowledge of Christ are bound to be fruitless. There is no need for a Christian to be a professional theologian in order to know that “*sine me nihil potestis facere*” (Jn 15:5), without God’s help, there is nothing we can know or achieve. Without prayer, faith in Christ becomes disfigured. That is why, despite all internal and external obstacles, an attitude of spiritual childhood is required to enter into the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 18:3).

True piety, in turn, is nourished by doctrine; and this doctrine is supplied to a very large extent by theology, through the systematic exposition of the truths of our faith and that which is related to them. There has never been any enmity between theology and devotion. In a sense, both are human responses to God’s free gift of faith. The men whose minds and hearts are rooted in God can see their life of faith grow stronger, and conversely that faith stirs in them a growing interest to know and to love God.

St. Teresa of Avila always wanted learned confessors for her nuns. Seeking this kind of rapport with doctrine grounded on theology has been a constant feature of pious souls, on the understanding, however, that doctrine may not be well understood unless it is guided by prayer.

It can be stated, therefore, that true piety is a theological piety and that true theology widens and increases the scope of piety.

Doctrinal piety

He who has received the gift of faith cannot be happy with merely keeping it; he must put it to work, and make it yield fruit in terms of works of service and fidelity to Jesus Christ. This effort has a double aspect since it entails the exercise of pious practices as well as growth in doctrinal formation, all of which amounts to strengthening the connection of faith with the intellect and the will. This duty concerns all of the baptized, whether they be theologians or not. No theologian can fail to be devout without being inconsistent with his faith. No believer can afford to deprive his mind of the solid food of Christian doctrine.

St. Paul used unequivocal words to remind Timothy of this duty: “Train thyself in godliness. For bodily training is of little profit, while godliness is profitable in all respects since it has the promise of the present life as well as that which is to come” (I Tim 4:7–8). Jesus himself often urged his disciples to be constant in prayer. The type of piety this calls for is inconceivable if the mind is full of “foolish fables and old wives’ tales” (I Tim 4:7), if a person’s conversation concerns “profane and empty babblings, for they contribute much to ungodliness” (II Tim 2:16). In order to avoid corruption of the faith, an adequate formation acquired through study of doctrine is needed. “The wicked and imposters will go from bad to worse, erring and leading into error. But do thou continue in the things that thou hast learned and that have been entrusted to thee, knowing from whom thou hast learned them. For from thy infancy thou hast known the sacred writings, which are able to instruct thee unto salvation by faith in Christ Jesus” (II Tim 3:13–15). It is clear then that true piety rests on study of the faith. Thus, a few years ago, St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer warned that no one is free from the duty of acquiring doctrinal formation, specifying what he meant by doctrine: “that knowledge which each and every one of the faithful should have concerning the total mission of the Church, as well as that of his own corresponding participation and specific responsibility within

that mission. This is, as the Holy Father has repeatedly reminded us, the huge educational task the Church must face after the Council.”¹

Illiteracy, either in the field of doctrine or in the life of prayer, being the opposite of what has been quoted so far, would eventually lead to infidelity to Jesus Christ.

Public devotions

The piety of the faithful sinks its roots into the most solid truths of faith, and its external manifestations have always been promoted by the hierarchy of the Church which time and again gave them approval and encouragement. Adoration of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, devotion to the Mother of God, and prayers to the saints, far from implying doctrinal deviations, correspond to the highest theology of the Church. The Roman Catechism of Pius V says: “We must constantly ask the Mother of Mercy and Advocate of Christians to pray for us sinners; through this invocation we must ask the protection and help of Our Lady, whose merits before God only the impious and the wicked can doubt to be most excellent, and whose will to favor the human race has no limits,” adding a little later that “we also have recourse to the Blessed who are in heaven; addressing prayers to them is something so well established in the Catholic Church that the faithful cannot admit any doubt whatsoever concerning it.”²

That Catechism was prepared by the best theologians of its day for the use of pastors, so that they would be in a position to teach the faithful a truly doctrinal piety in keeping with the Catholic doctrine which had just been reaffirmed by the Council of Trent. Thus, a type of piety in which Our Lady or the saints are not given a prominent place would be doctrinally illiterate, lacking in depth of knowledge about theological truths which were declared as such by the magisterium.

It would therefore be both unjust and untrue to say that the devotions of the faithful are alien to the spirit of the gospel or not in keeping with the directions of the magisterium. Those who take scandal at the piety of practicing Catholics do so simply out of ignorance of Catholic doctrine and Catholic theology.

In order to be a Christian, prayer is a fundamental requirement, especially prayer of petition. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you” (Mt 7:7). Substituting minutes of silence for prayer is not only less theological, but it is also less effective from a pastoral point of view. It would be surprising if someone could attain a rich interior life based on silent interludes while participating in assemblies.

The idea that “modern man” cannot pray, or that “asking things” is not proper, does not make good theology. The idea that receiving the sacraments fills some atavistic desire for ancient magic rites does not make theology either. In any case, this idea would be cheap and misguided sociology, as well as being anti-theological insofar as it ignores theology’s scientific foundation—Sacred Revelation transmitted by the Church of Jesus Christ.

Popular devotions in their varied manifestations fully correspond to the directions of the magisterium: Corpus Christi processions, the Way of the Cross, recital of the rosary, veneration of pictures or statues of Our Lady, pilgrimages to her shrines, devotion to the holy angels or to St. Joseph, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the cult of representations of Our Lord’s passion, Eucharistic Congresses, novenas, votive candles, holy water, flowers, May devotions. They are all a synthesis of the rich faith which impels the Christian faithful to come closer to God in a spirit of filial love.

1. Palabra No. 26, October, 1967.

2. Rom. Cat., Part IV, Ch. V:8; VI:2.

Devotion to Our Lady

It should be particularly stressed that popular devotion to Our Lady, far from falling into what some Protestants have called “Mariolatry,” is an expression of doctrinal identification with the teachings of the Church, and a guarantee of proper understanding of Christian truth on the part of millions of Catholics throughout the world. Pope Paul, at the closing of the Second Vatican Council, referred to Mary as “Mother of the Church,” and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in one of its last paragraphs, has the following request:

Let the entire body of the faithful pour forth persevering prayer to the Mother of God and Mother of men. Let them implore that she who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers may now, exalted as she is in heaven above all the saints and angels, intercede with her Son in the fellowship of all the saints. May she do so until all the peoples of the human family . . . are happily gathered together in peace and harmony into the one People of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity.³

The same Dogmatic Constitution, only a few lines before, laid down the following guidelines:

This most holy Synod . . . admonishes all the sons of the Church that the cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin, be generously fostered. It charges that practices and exercises of devotion toward her be treasured as recommended by the teaching authority of the Church in the course of centuries, and that those decrees issued in earlier times regarding the veneration of images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints, be religiously observed.⁴

This teaching is an integral part of our Catholic faith, and concerns everybody. Those who, while knowing it, not only fail to practice it, but go as far as criticizing it, cannot excuse themselves in the name of theology. They should clearly say that they are stating their own personal opinion (which, of course, in this case is a mistaken opinion).

The meaning of the Church’s teaching on this point is unmistakably clear. Whoever honors Our Lady, obeys the Church; whoever honors her by praying the rosary, visiting her shrines, imitating her virtues, contemplating her life . . . does so in keeping with the explicit directions of the Holy Father:

We are convinced that this faithfulness in the veneration of Mary becomes a source of blessings such as firmness in the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, love of the Gospel, efforts towards a Christian regeneration of one’s customs and sentiments, and the pride and joy of belonging to the Catholic Church.⁵

Our veneration for Our Lady will always fall short of what is her due. According to the Pope, “it can never equal the honor that our Lord himself accorded to her, or the veneration that the divine plan for her should deserve; she herself foresaw her own dignity when she prophesied that all generations would call her blessed.”⁶

Pluralism respected in a context of unity

It is good to keep in mind that not only theology but also piety offers a rich pluralism of forms which has nothing to do with lack of unity. While some devotions seem quite adequate to certain people, they do not

3. *Lumen Gentium*, No. 69.

4. *Ibid.* No. 67.

5. Pope Paul VI, Homily, February 2, 1965.

6. Pope Paul VI, Address to the Council Fathers, October 11, 1965.

fit the spiritual tastes of others. Yet nobody has the right to despise or look down on those whose inclinations are different from his own.

Christian open-mindedness appreciates freedom, and it goes beyond a mere tolerance of devotions that may be found either hard or distasteful. “I respect and love those public devotions, though personally I would rather convey a similar love and warm-heartedness toward Mary in the intimacy of personal visits, or even in the company of small groups,” are words of St. Josemaría in his homily “To Jesus through Mary.”⁷ Later, he adds:

There are many Christians who make their own the old custom of wearing the scapular. There are others who acquire the habit of greeting (just a glance, a thought, no words are needed) the images of Our Lady that are found in every Christian home or adorning the streets of many cities. Still some others prefer the Holy Rosary—a wonderful prayer in which the soul, as lovers often do, never grows tired of saying the same things over and over again, while reliving the most meaningful moments of our Lord’s life. Or some may choose to consecrate one particular day every week to Our Lady by offering her some small sacrifice and meditating on her Maternity . . . Each one is free to select his own way. There are many other Marian devotions which I need not mention here. A Christian doesn’t need to live them all. (Growing in supernatural life is not a matter of piling one devotion on top of another.) I would say, however, that anyone who doesn’t live some of them, who doesn’t express his love for Mary in some way, does not possess the fullness of the faith. . . . It is God who has given us Mary, and we have no right to reject her. We should go to her with a son’s love and joy.

Pluralism, then, is good, above all when it is bathed in a deep respect towards all the manifestations of devotion which have the blessing of the Church. That respect becomes a guarantee of the fundamental unity among all Christians who wish to be faithful to Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Church.

It is in this sense that many conferences of bishops have echoed the exhortations of Pope Paul VI requesting that theologians and preachers refrain from “proposing as Catholic doctrine their own personal opinions which are often open to question, and above all any ‘mere hypotheses’ or ‘opinions disturbing the faith,’ for they have nowadays become the cause of so much harm among the Christian people.”⁸ Both theologians and preachers ought to limit themselves to teaching only what is safe doctrine, in keeping with the directions of the magisterium, and to avoid anything that might cause scandal among the faithful. Their legitimate intellectual freedom does not exonerate them from their duty to respect at all times the dogmas defined by the Church, and to take the necessary precautions so that certain ideas which perhaps are only at the stage of “working hypotheses” may not mislead ordinary believers.

Abuses

As said before, Christian life requires devotional practices together with doctrinal knowledge of the truths of our faith. Consequently guiding Christian people means contributing toward their life of prayer as well as toward their theological education. This mission belongs to the bishops in communion with the Roman Pontiff, and the *salus animarum* (salvation of souls) depends to a large extent on its correct fulfillment.

“No matter how necessary the role of theologians may be, it is not to the learned that God has entrusted the mission of interpreting the faith of the Church. This faith rests on the life of the people, whose responsibility before God is borne by the bishops; it is they who must teach the people what God wants the faithful to believe.”⁹

7. Cf. J. Escriva de Balaguer, Homilies: To Jesus through Mary, May 4, 1957.

8. Pope Paul VI, Address, December 8, 1970.

9. Ibid.

One of the tragedies of our times is that certain pseudo-theologians have chosen to ignore this clear and unequivocal teaching of the Church. They and their followers have formed themselves into “select” groups and, skillfully manipulating the press—both Catholic and secular—have imposed a minority opinion on an unsuspecting public. Typical of their methods is the self-righteous fashion in which they purport to have discovered “grave errors” in the traditional practices of Christian devotion. With the ostensible purpose of bringing this subject into the open, they have analyzed it almost to death. As could be expected, their findings (based of course on the latest experiences of sociology and psychology) are quite negative. It may be all right, they conclude, to allow some underdeveloped Christians to retain their religious beliefs and practices, but mature Christians, they say, must by all means be weaned from such backward habits and led on to theologically richer practices—a euphemism for their own pet theories.

This trend is more disturbing because of its basic errors. A peculiar aversion to popular devotions has characterized those who left the Church in the past. The fact that similar dislike is spreading among some writers of our own day is symptomatic of their true relationship to Christianity. By turning their back on what they call the traditions of the “popular Church” (Volkskirche) and assuring us that those who still practice these devotions belong to a decadent Catholicism, they reveal to what extent they themselves are out of touch with reality.

Still, their influence has been sadly effective. If many of the faithful today no longer know what to believe, the blame lies squarely on the shoulders of these “false prophets” (Mt 7:15). For, no matter how much they proclaim a true “evangelical spirit,” it is obvious they have forgotten that being a Christian means going to God along the path shown to us by Christ: a path which requires that all become like little children—including those who are doctors in sacred theology, a path that cannot be traveled by the conceited nor by those who lack faith, no matter how learned they may be. Nor is it a path that can be trodden by those who feel ashamed of believing the same things that are believed by the illiterate, by old women, by children who can hardly recite from memory the Lord’s Prayer or the Hail Mary.

If believing in Christ and loving Christ were to be something as confused and ambiguous as some theologians describe, many would think that Christ had revealed himself for the exclusive benefit of groups of sophisticated specialists who, by methodic doubt, arrive at explanations above the heads of ordinary people. Yet the Gospel was written in simple language intelligible to the less endowed, to men from all backgrounds, to children, and to the old.

Popular devotions, which are the fruit of a true knowledge of God obtained partly through theology, lead to a faithful following of the Gospel. On the other hand, by no mere coincidence, the same people who would allow devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, devotions to Our Lady and to the saints . . . only as a lesser evil, would also find it silly to become like little children in order to reach the kingdom of Heaven, cruel to talk about hell, or anthropocentric to accept the invitation to take up the cross every day.

Undoubtedly, the teaching of the Church cannot be identified with the isolated opinions of an “elite” bent on distorting (purifying they will say) her doctrine and her customs. This is a point to be insisted upon, in order to avoid deceptions. Both piety and theology are essential elements of Christian life. If some are found lacking in doctrinal formation, they should be given proper instruction; but nobody has the right to take their devotional practices away from them. If some others be still unaware of the importance of exercises of piety, let them be encouraged to practice them without neglecting their theological instruction. That is why there cannot possibly be any misunderstanding or incompatibility between theology and popular devotions, since they both take their origin from the faith transmitted by the Church.