



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

May 1984

FALSE DIVINITY

When Satan was tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden, he promised her that if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would be as a god, knowing good and evil. He held out to her the possibility of transcending her human limitations and becoming divine. By eating the fruit, he told her, she could stop being a wretched little woman, and become the equal of God.

Like most of Satan's lies, this one has an element of truth in it. While Eve did not stop being human -- and became a sinful human at that -- she did take on a certain divine character. From Eve on, all mankind has had a "divine" outlook on the world. Everyone sees himself as the center of the universe. We expect everything and everyone to revolve around us. Our little self is the center of the world for us -- not God. We each pretend to be a god, seeing everything in terms of ourselves.

This divinity is false. It is not what men are really like. They are not actually gods but men. They are not each at the center of the universe: that is impossible after all, for there is but one true Center. Man's perspective makes pretensions to being divine, but it is only a pretension.

Nevertheless, the pretension still has serious consequences. We learn that as soon we try to live with God at the Center. It is hard to live that way. We keep falling back into our habitual outlook: our needs, our de-

sires, our pleasures and pains. We keep seeing the world in terms of our own goals. Does this relationship give me what I need? Do I make enough money in this job? Does the worship of this parish give me what I need to get out of it? Do I really get enough out of the spiritual life? Do I find my job fulfilling and satisfying?

The perspective of this false divinity has many manifestations. It leads some people to chronic spiritual depression. Seeing their failings all too clearly, they begin to hate themselves. Their divinity tells them that they have the power to do well in the spiritual life on their own, that they "ought" to be doing better. They know they should not be doing these sinful little things. They know better. They even know that they should not be depressed. And yet they are. They see it all in such limited terms: all revolves around the self. Their god thinks that it can save itself, so it leaves God out altogether.

Others become preoccupied with their spiritual exercises. They want to try many different techniques of meditation. They want to vary the form of the Daily Office to see what works best. They have many books about the spiritual life. They are always on the lookout for that one person that can really lead them into spiritual progress. They are always ready to change their rule of life in hopes that something else will work better. The problem here is that they understand what is "working" to be that which makes them feel more spiritual. They define it in terms of themselves, not in terms of God. They look for forms of prayer that will make them recollected, undistracted and always thinking about God. This is certainly pleasing to themselves, but it may not be all that pleasing to God. For He may want them to learn patience or perseverance or some other lesson learned only through adversity in prayer. Besides, they are seeking redemption in the forms -- their own work -- rather than in God.

Others, especially beginners in the spiritual life, begin to identify what they want with what God wants. When they have first tasted the sweet fruits of communion with God, and have experienced His hand at work in their lives, they fall into the trap of thinking that just because they want something, it must be God at work within them that wants it. The perspective of their false divinity has not yet been reformed by God's grace, while they think it has been entirely healed. They think only God's perspective remains within them. This condition is easily identified by the rank selfishness it produces -- all the while clothed in terms of "what God wants for me."

Still others become professional dissenters. Nothing ever pleases them, especially in church. The music is too loud or too soft; the people are not very friendly or else too intrusive during the service; the priest doesn't preach very well (and certainly preaches too long); there are not enough activities in the parish and not enough young people; the budget doesn't spend money on the right things. Their problem is that they think it is all there to please them. They

think that they are the center of all that is important, and it should all satisfy their tastes. They forget that the Church is not theirs but belongs to Jesus Christ.

The false divinity that is ours from the Fall is clearly a major spiritual problem, whatever the particular form it takes. We cannot just undo the Fall, as much as we might wish to. We cannot go back to Eden. The change in our perspective is such that we cannot repair it by ourselves. Pretending that our false divinity is not with us doesn't help either. When Adam and Eve had eaten, their eyes were opened: they saw what they had done, and that there was no hope of their undoing it. That means that there is no magic little pill we can take -- spiritually or otherwise -- that will make it all go away. The only way we can regain our true perspective is through the long process of sanctification.

We need Another if we are to be delivered, which brings us to the Cross, the antidote to our false divinity. Jesus is the cure we need. His self-giving upon the Tree breaks the power of our false divinity. He shows us the way to return to our true identity. The Way is His Way: the way of self-giving. Anything we do that helps us to live His life will break the thrall of our false divinity, and free us to live the life God has intended for us.

God in His love has given us many, many ways of sharing Jesus' life: worship, love, penitence, friendship, humor, affliction, prayer. By accepting these opportunities as they present themselves in our lives, we allow God to heal our selfishness. These are the opportunities by which our false divinity can be replaced with the true humanity of Jesus Christ.

Worship: In worshipping God, we acknowledge the true Center. We admit that our pretensions are false, and that we are but creatures. Then we begin to let go of our divinity as we experience ever more the reality of God's divinity. Our false divinity would prevent our worship. We cannot worship another while worshipping self. We can only worship if we do it as creatures and give up being gods. Every effort of worship and adoration strikes a blow at our false divinity.

Affliction: When things do not go right for us (for reasons beyond our control) then we must face the fact that the world does not conform to our desires for it. It is beyond our control. We find ourselves without the power of a god, the power that our divinity tells us that we ought to have. Our affliction, unpleasant as it may be, forces the issue. In it we see our helplessness. And in our helplessness, we see that our divinity must be false. It leads us to seek the true God who has the power over all that happens. This is an opportunity to share the Cross, which leads us out of ourselves and into God.

Love: Love which is returned leads us out of ourselves as well. We begin to see the beloved as important not just in what he means to

us, but as a person in his own right. We want to do what is best for him even if it is not in our own interest. Thus we have acknowledged -- almost without knowing it -- that there is another center equal with our own. This is true even if our love is not returned -- an unhappy and often difficult situation. For then we will give without reward. We will find ourselves loving not for what we get out of it, but simply because it is what we must do. This is a true reflection of God's love for us: He loves because it is His nature, not because He gets something out of it. Our false divinity will have nothing to do with such a sacrificial and self-giving enterprise.

Penitence: Penitence is the acknowledgement that we are creatures in need of God's redemption. It is more important as an attitude and way of life than as a particular act of giving something up. Because it admits at the very start that redemption is necessary, and that I am not capable of producing that redemption, it crucifies the false divinity. For a god neither needs redemption, nor is powerless to do what is needed.

Humor: When we can laugh at our pretensions, we have reached the point where they no longer exercise their tyranny over us. This is to see them at least a bit as God sees them. For, if you look at our powerlessness, and our great inclinations to botch things up, the idea that we are gods is a great joke. The sooner we can enjoy the joke, the sooner we can get on with being Christians.

These are some of the opportunities we have to give up our false divinity. Worship, affliction, love, penitence and humor strike at the root of the problem, that selfishness we inherit from Adam. The manifestations of our false divinity need treatment too, of course, even as we seek to deal with the root. Depression, for example, needs to be addressed with the love and power of God overcoming the helplessness of man. Then true Christian self-love can begin to replace the self-hatred which produced the depression.

But even as we try to deal with the manifestations -- and we spend much of our Christian lives doing just that -- we should not lose sight of the larger problem: the root of our selfishness. At every turn God gives us opportunities to become God-centered instead of self-centered. Each opportunity is a chance to walk in the way of the Cross, to share Christ's life. In His image we are made. The second Adam has come to undo the sin of the first, and to share the results with us. God became man that man might become divine -- sharing Christ's resurrected life, rather than Adam's sinful life. We are intended to be God's adopted children. Then we will share His divinity: one not of selfishness and lies, but one of self-giving love and of truth.

