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The Crown of Prayer and Praise: Worship in Donne's LA Corona

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THIS CROWN OF PRAYER AND PRAISE:
WORSHIP IN DONNE'S *LA CORONA*

By

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ABSTRACT

THIS CROWN OF PRAYER AND PRAISE: WORSHIP IN DONNE'S *LA CORONA*

By

Erin E. Colgrove

In deliberate acknowledgement of some of the most contentious issues of his day, Donne engages the structure of the Roman Catholic rosary in his attempt to offer the church of the Elizabethan era a model of Christ-centered worship. Finding both the idolatry in Roman Catholic worship and the severe Protestant rejection of “forms of joy and art” in worship to be equally undesirable, John Donne sought a return to biblical worship by centering his concerns upon the person of Christ. Within the seven sonnets of his crown-sequence *La Corona*, Donne unfolds two parallel journeys, that of Christ in Incarnation and that of the soul with Christ, in order to affectively render a model of worship as beautiful and unending as it is fixed wholly upon the work of the Incarnate Christ. Realizing the shortcomings of human understanding in matters of worship, Donne confidently offers the knowledge of Christ as the solution to the problems that threatened the church of his day.

This project primarily focuses upon the sonnet sequence *La Corona* in exploration of these matters, but it likewise considers the context offered in Donne's sermons, sacred writings, and other pertinent texts from his time.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Bob and Terri Colgrove.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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THIS CROWN OF PRAYER AND PRAISE:
WORSHIP IN DONNE'S *LA CORONA*

The church of the Middle Ages in its pre-Reformation state operated in a manner that placed significant distinction between church laity and church clergy. In this era, laity were considered incapable of understanding Scriptural truth for themselves and therefore dependent upon outside sources to aid and guide them in devotion. Because of the ecclesiastical priority placed upon the simplification of Scriptural truth and religious experience for the common congregant, Roman Catholic church leaders determined their congregants most needed a *biblia pauperum*, or "Scripture for the poor," a tool that would lead congregants through a systematized consideration of salvation. One of the means of *biblia pauperum* the Roman Catholic Church found was the rosary, a devotional object whose wide popularity among Roman Catholics and notoriety among Reformers quickly defined its role in the contentious Elizabethan religious environment.

Anne Winston-Allen, whose ground-breaking *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* prompted a resurgence of rosary devotion at the end of the twentieth century, describes the importance of rosary devotion to Middle Age Roman Catholic congregants: "By serially picturing and reflecting on the stations of Christ's life and death, the laity could both sanctify daily life and participate in the collective prayer of the church at the liturgical hours and during mass" (16). If unlearned congregants could not understand scripture themselves, church leaders

surmised, they could memorize prayers and meditations to sanctify their lives by continually directing their thoughts to scriptural matters, and thus keeping in a constant state of devotion. The worshiper praying the rosary would recite the rosary prayers, all the while meditating on the mystery associated with the decade of prayers he was reciting and tracking his progression through the cycle with the rosary beads or, in simpler forms, with knotted cords. The rosary, “Mary’s Psalter,” originally functioned as the laymen’s prayer book; ideally, through the aid of this structural *biblia pauperum*, the common worshiper could live a sanctified life by constantly remembering the work of Christ.

Fueled by sensitivity to error and heresy in Roman Catholic church doctrine and practice, Protestant Reformers associated with rosary meditation a shift of worship aided by images to worship of image; and rosary use fell under Protestant attack. According to Reformers, icons, a broad categorization that included images and objects such as the rosary, violated the second commandment of the Decalogue, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” (Ex. 20:4). By the enactment of Henry VIII’s Act of Succession and the onset of the Reformation, Roman Catholicism yielded a veritable cache of graven images that Reformers believed deviated from the simplicity of the Word and converted its followers into idolaters instead of believers.

In addition to viewing images and objects as idolatrous, Protestant reformers also viewed them as the embodiment of the scriptural errors they had identified with Roman Catholicism. Congregants’ supplication of images had obscured Scriptural grace and faith, converting prayer into ritual, worship of God into veneration of his saints,

grace into works, and the cross of Christ into one of many means of access to grace. To Protestant Reformers concerned with purging the church of Catholicism, Roman Catholic images and objects were idols, and worship involving them idolatrous; they perpetuated error, and worship associated with them, by extension, was heretical. Rosary worship fell into the same category as the worshiping of relics or the venerating of saints, religious acts that congregants would perform in search of salvation. An iconoclastic controversy erupted across continental Europe and in Elizabethan England over the use of objects and images in worship.

With the rise of iconoclasm, the rosary became a highly controversial and, at times, illegal object. While legend long assigned its origins to St. Dominic, the twelfth-century founder of the Dominican order, the traditions of prayer bead usage and unending Hail Mary repetitions had been present for most of church history, making the rosary's complicated history elusive at best. Rosary devotees completed rosary prayers as acts of penance, and as means to obtain indulgences or to release souls from purgatory; popes promised devotees reduced penance for praying rosary prayers and, in some cases, assured congregants that other family members and friends could draw upon the surplus of indulgences earned through the devout's rosary prayers (*Stories* 28). According to Anne Winston-Allen, one devout rosary worshiper reported reducing a six-hundred-year purgatory penance to fifteen days through recitation of rosary prayers (28). In some instances she records, certain devout Dominican nuns would say a thousand Hail Marys per day, doubling the number on holy days, while miracle stories told of a knight who warded off an adulterous temptation by reciting the prayers (15).

The rosary's reliance upon the Virgin Mary as intercessor and "Queen of Heaven" within a circuit designed to form a spiritual crown of praise for the Virgin confirmed for Protestant Reformers the rosary's standing as an idolatrous object of worship.

In a complicated religious environment fraught with contention, Donne chose to approach the matter of iconoclasm differently from his contemporaries. He expresses his opinion in "Satyre III" concerning the use of images, finding a *via media* alternative to the controversial matters of his day:

To adore, or scorn an image, or protest,

May all be bad; doubt wisely; in strange way

To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;

To sleep, or run wrong, is. (76-9)

Equally concerned with the radical reactions of Protestant Reforms as with the error of the Roman Catholics, Donne felt that neither worship nor outright rejection of an image constituted a proper response to church error. Instead, he found a *via media* in deliberate acknowledgement and careful consideration of the issues: inquiring right, or discerning; neither adoring, scorning, nor protesting the images and objects in question. Donne identifies a *via media* even more clearly in "The Litanie": "Lord, let us run / Mean ways," he prays, "and call them stars, but not the sun" (116-7), defining an important relationship between honored saints, biblical characters and Christ. In practice, Donne ran "mean ways," not succumbing to the extremes of any system, which in his context involved either the error of Roman Catholic idolatry or the severity of the Calvinist reaction to Roman error; for either side, by Donne's construction, failed in its response

to the matter. In his writings, Donne's "mean ways" discern the obscured value and beauty of Roman Catholic symbolism for the clarification of biblical truths and for the worship of Christ. In the structural metaphor of *La Corona*, Donne recovers the utility of the controversial Roman Catholic rosary, finding in the rosary a profound devotional aid, a means of displaying the beauty of worship and communion centered upon Christ.

1. MY MUSES WHITE SINCERITY: THE ARRIVAL OF STRUCTURE

With *La Corona*, Donne crafts a literary imitation of the Roman Catholic rosary through which his soul communes with Christ in reverent meditation upon the Incarnation. The Latin term *corona*, or *crown of roses*, is used interchangeably with the term *rosary* to refer to the rosary circuit. Rosary traditions claim the Angel Gabriel's original greeting of the Virgin Mary recorded in Luke 1:28 as perhaps the earliest beginnings of a rosary tradition: "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (*Stories* 13). The angel's greeting formed the basis for the Ave prayer, which, when combined with meditations, prayers, and structural variations contributed to the development of the rosary sequence over the centuries. From the earliest Ave repetitions, the rosary prayer eventually emerged as a *vita Christi*, or life of Christ, meditation by the early centuries of the Middle Ages. The actual Roman Catholic rosary develops a circuitous route of prayers designed to lead the devotee progressively through meditations upon phases, or mysteries, of the life of Christ.

Each loop around the rosary sequence involves multiple combinations of Pater Noster, Fatima, and Gloria prayers organized around groupings of ten Aves; each grouping of ten, or decade, focuses upon a single mystery. With most rosary sequences, such as the Augustine, a complete circuit involves five decades of Aves; with any sequence, the worshiper ideally loops around the rosary three times, completing a number of Aves equal to that of the biblical Psalms, thus earning the title “Mary’s Psalter” for the sequence. According to Roman Catholic tradition, each single Ave symbolizes a single rose; and completing the entire rosary, or praying through three circuits, signifies the formation of an entire garland of roses (*Rosencranz*) for the worshiper spiritually to offer to the Virgin.

In Roman Catholic rosary meditation, the act of beautifying the object of worship, or of personally experiencing the beauty of worship, figured centrally in developing the worshiper’s devotion as an appropriate response to the beauty of God. Nathan Mitchell, responding to Anne Winston-Allen’s work with his own compendium, *The Mystery of the Rosary*, explains the affective capabilities of the imagery found in the rosary: “[It] intends to evoke rather than explain, to expand the praying person’s imagination rather than to define doctrine or defend moral principle” (78). The symbolism of a rose garland offered to the Virgin revealed the beauty of Christ, to whom the author of the Song of Solomon refers to as the “Rose of Sharon” and “Lily of the Valley” (2:1). “With links to the mystical Christian iconography of the rose,” Winston-Allen explains, “the enclosed paradise garden of the Song of Songs came to be interpreted in many works as Mary herself – that virginal garden in which the rose,

Christ, was planted” (9). The loveliness of Christ, as represented in the rosary, surpassed that of many roses.

Roman Catholics of the Elizabethan era found in rosary meditation an attractive and effective means for producing Christ-like lives, a reflection of the trend towards *imitatio Christi* practices. “Instead of simple Aves, repeated ritualistically because the Virgin liked to hear them, or psalms recited round the clock in order literally to pray without ceasing,” Winston-Allen explains, “*imitatio* exercises had as their goal the conforming of the individual worshiper to the model of Christ. This shift from an outward to an inward focus was directed toward transforming the person” (27).

Through this style of meditation, the soul encounters the beauty of worship and remains in a constant state of devotion.

For common congregants, the cycle of rosary prayers and meditations humanized the gospel, bringing it within their constant reach. No longer was worship tied to infrequent visits to priests or to liturgies; here was worship portable, understandable, accessible, as present at the plow in the fields as in the sanctuary of a majestic cathedral. With the rosary prayer, illiterate congregants could memorize prayers that would help them constantly meditate upon the scriptures that they could neither read nor possess; and, in these meditations, they could find means to commune with Christ (27).

For many rosary devotees, the beauty of the rosary prayer lay in its ability to guide meditation into intimate consideration of the events, people, and significance of the Incarnation of Christ. In “A Breefe directory – howe to say the Rosary with

meditations,” a Roman Catholic worshiper offered a rosary guide to his sister and “the many good women in Englande that honour our Lady,” since “good bookes to stirre vp deuotion in them are scarce,” a possible allusion to the scarcity of recusant Roman Catholic devotional books in Protestant England. The author, identified only as “I. M.,” begins his rosary meditations by drawing worshipers into meditation upon the angel’s announcement of Christ’s conception to the Virgin: “Thinke you do beholde and see our blessed Lady kneeling devoutly all alone at her prayers. And howe that on a soden the Angel Gabriel appeared unto her in glorious shining brightnes, saluting her with Hayle Mary full of grace.” As the author continues his meditation, he unfolds the story of Christ from the perspectives of both Christ and Christ’s sorrowing mother; his reverent tone leads devotees into meaningful reflection upon Christ’s earthly life and sacrifice. “Beholde yet for al this the humilitie of our Lady,” the author writes, “nothing proude heereof, but humblye geveth God the honour and prayse thereof, for that he vouchsafed to looke upon the humbleness of his handmaiden, as in the Magnificat.” The spiritual utility of the meditation is apparent in its soul-compelling, intimate consideration of the circumstances of Christ’s lowly birth; readers encounter a beautifully structured meditation, a written work of art in which they are drawn into the beauty of the story of redemption.

Nevertheless, Protestant Reformers objected to the rosary’s obscurity of Christ in favor of the Virgin, as the blessedness of Christ too tightly intertwined with blessedness of Mary. “It hath in their eye too great affinitie with the forme of the Church of Rome,” Richard Hooker explained in his *Lawes*. “The songs of Magnificat,

Benedictus and Nunc dimittis it might verie well spare; it hath the Latanie, the Creed of Athanasius and Gloria patri, which are superfluous”(129-120). The rosary devotee could expect to address the Virgin as “Blessed Lady,” “Queene of Heauen,” and “Maistresse of the Earth”; and to seek her assistance in spiritual matters sacred to the offices of God. “Mother of our Lord and Sauioure Jesus Christe,” one of the prayers included with the rosary guide runs,

pray and make earnest intercession unto thy sonne for me most wretched sinner thy seruauant, and for al holy Catholike church, for remission of sines, for increase of vertue, for peace and health of the faythfull people, and for all the seruats of God, both the liuing and the dead, that the almightie God through thy prayers and holy petitions, may haue mercye uppon the sinfull Nations and people full of iniquities, both nowe and for euer. Amen. (*Breefe*, n. pag.)

To seek Mary for “remission of sines” and “increase of virtue,” and for intercession for “all the seuants of God, both the liuing and the dead” – such prayers evidenced alarmingly idolatrous practices of seeking one other than God in prayer and worship, and Donne’s Reformed contemporaries positioned the issue of Mariolatry at the forefront of their objections concerning Roman Catholic rosary meditation. Not only did the rosary direct adoration to the Virgin; but in seeking the Virgin as intercessor for the souls and sins of man, it thus failed to direct worship to God.

In his defining theological work *Lawes of Ecclesiastical polity*, Richard Hooker handles the concerns of his Reformed contemporaries, explaining the danger of seeking intercessors other than Christ in forms of worship:

Superstition is, when thinges are either abhorde or observd, with a zealous or fearfull, but erroneous relation to God. By meanes whereof the superstitious doe sometymes serve, though the true God, yet with needles offices, and defraude him of duties necessarie, sometime loade others then him with such honors as properlie are his. The one their oversight, who misse in the choice of that wherewith; the other theirs, who faile in the election of him towards whome they show devotion : this the crime of Idolatrie, that the fault of voluntarie either nicenes, or superfluitie in religion. (28)

Hooker warns that “loading others then him with such honors as are properlie his” is a failure of devotion, and one that defrauds God of the worship He alone deserves.

Hooker, whose *Lawes* outline a balance of practice between Roman Catholicism and extreme Protestant reformers following Huldrych Zwingli’s application of Calvinism, held that Christ only interceded for the believer, as established by Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoyce in hope of the glory of God” (5:1-2). For one to seek the Mother of Christ, and not Christ Himself, as mediator or intercessor is not only to commit the idolatrous sin of directing prayer and worship to one other than God, but to

misappropriate God's established means of intercession – in Hooker's terms, to defraud God of his proper honors; in biblical terms, to commit the sin of idolatry. Through Christ, the believer has no need to seek an intercessor in saints or in the Mother of Christ; instead, the believer can directly approach God through the intercessory work of Christ the High Priest, as the writer of Hebrews explains that "he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

In zealous opposition to the idolatrous error they saw, many of Donne's Reformed contemporaries insisted on wholesale elimination of controversial religious items; and their insistence resulted in the destruction of Roman Catholic cathedrals, statues, artwork, and objects across the continent and in England. On the continent, Beeldenstorm, an iconoclastic campaign begun in 1566, saw to the destruction of Roman Catholic objects on a large scale; other iconoclastic riots seethed throughout the Reformation. In his *Lawes*, Richard Hooker describes the scope of the Reformed church's dealings with iconoclasm in the destruction of Roman Catholic cathedrals: "Others rapt with the pang of a furious zeale do powre out against them devout blasphemies crying *Downe with them, downe with them even to the very ground. For to idolatry they have bene abused. And the places where idols have bene worshiped are by the Law of God devote to utter destruction*" (61). In *The Reformation*, Patrick Collinson describes the results of a thirteen-day effort that took place on the continent in the earlier years of iconoclasm: "Standing statues and their niches and bases were removed. Painted altarpieces were burned outside. Murals were chipped and scraped off the walls. It took thirteen days. One pious citizen, a veteran of pilgrimage, found the result

'hideous.' Zwingli exulted: 'The walls are beautifully white!'" (189) In England, with the religion-contingent monarchies, matters of religious affiliation became matters of martyrdom and exile; any object identified with Roman Catholicism in Elizabethan England faced destruction.

Donne, looking to "run mean ways," carefully considered the controversies surrounding him. "When I behold that these Psalmes are become / So well attyr'd abroad, so ill at home, / So well in Chambers, in thy Church so ill," he wrote, lamenting the loss of "formes of joy and art" in prayer and praise,

As I can scarce call that reform'd, untill
This be reform'd; Would a whole State present
A lesser gift than some on man hath sent?
And shall our Church, unto our Spouse and King
More hoarse, more harsh than any other, sing?
("Upon the translation," 37-9).

Donne, who appreciated the beauty of the exquisite work of Christ, longed for the appropriate use of beauty within worship and mourned the offering of a reduced form of worship, a "lesser gift," one "more hoarse, more harsh" than the majestic forms that others – conceivably Roman Catholic worshipers – offered. Seeing these lesser gifts as highly unfitting for the magnification of God, he yearned for worship that responded appropriately to the glory of God. In "The Litanie," he asks God's deliverance from the idolatrous potential of anything reflecting God's image, implying a need to carefully attend to these matters:

When plenty, Gods image, and seale
Make us idolatrous,
And love it, not him, whom it should reveale,
When we are moved to seeme religious
Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us. (185-9)

The rosary, as a devotional aid, satisfied Donne's desires for a "well attyr'd" Psalm. From its elegantly formed structure, its rich symbolism, its involvement of sensory imagery, and its reliance upon an interplay of spiritual and physical, the Rosary offered ideal ground for Donne to prove the beauty of worship for his Reformed contemporaries. Yet, like other objects whose abilities to reveal God ironically drew its worshipers' attention from God, its structural artistry could best function to move the worshiper to love "him, whom it should reveale," only through God's intervention.

Donne's careful attention to Christ-centered worship reflects that of Saint Paul, who wrote his letter to the Colossian church to address the problem of Gnosticism, a developing false philosophy that involved a mystic style of worship, calling the believers to return to the centrality of Christ in their faith and worship: "Continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel" (1:23). Just as St. Paul was compelled to combat false teaching by drawing the Colossians' attention back to the centrality of Christ, Donne found in the person of Christ means for reorienting a system of worship obscured by error and contention. Scriptural heresy, matters of idolatry, and worldly distractions all produce the same result in matters of worship: they endanger worship and essentially divert the believer's attention from

Christ. In overly valuing objects that originally intend to reveal God, the believer becomes an idolater, loving “it, not him whom it shoulde reveale” (“The Litanie,” 187).

These matters demand a careful response: “To decline towards the left hand, to Modifications, and Temporising in matter and forme of Religions, and to thinke all indifferent, all one; or to decline towards the right hand, in an over-vehement zeale, To pardon no errors, to abate nothing of heresie,” as he explains in the third of his Prebend sermons on the Psalms, “is also a Diversion, a Deviation, a Deflection, a Defection from this Rectitude, this Uprightnesse”(8). The discerning believer could not risk deviating from uprightness in being overcome by either indifference or over-done zeal when responding to “matter and forme of Religions.” To Donne, such matters possessed the added danger of detracting from the believer’s ultimate focus, Christ, as he explained with plainer terms in the Fourth of his Prebend Psalms: “If we will goe farther than to be Christians, and those doctrines, which the whole Christian Church hath ever beleevd, if we will be of *Cephas*, and of *Apollos*, if we will call our selves, or endanger, and give occasion to others, to call us from the Names of men, Papists, or Lutherans, or Calvinists,” he states, “we depart from the true glory and serenity, from the lustre and splendor of this Sunne”(11). A believer that missed the centrality of Christ in matters of faith, turned aside by divisive lesser issues, risked departing from the splendor and peace of God.

Inherently devotional practices depend upon Christ’s deliverance from the influence of human misuse, as Donne suggests in “The Litanie,” an extended prayer for preservation of worship. In “The Litanie,” he notes a collection of worship elements, but

misconstrued and misused through the flesh's influence. His listing of these elements includes practices unquestionably essential to worship for either side of the Reformation; one of the elements he specifies in his prayer is, perhaps ironically, prayer:

That Church in triumph, this in warfare here, [. . .]

Prayes ceaslesly, 'and thou hearken too

(Since to be gracious

Our taske is treble, to pray, beare, and doe)

Heare this prayer Lord, O Lord deliver us

From trusting in those prayers, though pow'r'd out thus. (119, 122-6)

Donne recognized the danger of misappropriating faith in a system of prayers and requested deliverance from the human capacity to corrupt even as spiritual a matter as prayer. By directing the worshipers' trust to an act of prayer rather than to the object of prayer, the prayers themselves become objects of the worshiper's trust and worship. While prayer empowers the work of the church, Donne's statement suggests that trusting in a system of prayers perverts the nature of prayer. From such prayers, Donne suggests, believers needed deliverance.

In mentioning prayer in "The Litanie" and involving prayer in *La Corona*, Donne recalls a complex discussion of the nature and forms of prayer within the Church of England. In question were the varieties of prayer, from private, spontaneous prayers; private, established prayers; and established, congregational prayers. In its rejection of anything popish, the Church of England could not avoid confronting definitions of structured and congregational prayer, the presence of which figured centrally in Roman

Catholic liturgical practices; however, the official response of English Church leaders seemed unconcerned with any correlation of practice between the two religious entities. The preface of the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer* conveys the English Church's estimation of the use of established prayer forms, stating, "There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted, as (among other things) it may plainly appear by the common prayers in the Church, commonly called divine service" (14). Anyone who failed to follow the established guidelines of prayer and ceremony contained within the *Book of Common Prayer* faced potential fines or imprisonment; English Church leaders placed high priority on their pre-established prayers. Donne felt similarly convinced, citing the Psalmists' frequent calls to public worship; he insisted in his sermons upon the utility of prayer structure and the necessity of congregational prayer. His reliance upon structure as a prayer guide in *La Corona* follows the liturgical tradition established in the early years of the church and sustained by the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Obverse from his awareness of potential misuse of objects, images, and structure in worship was his far greater appreciation of their utility. He felt that any object, through proper use, could draw one's soul to worship or clarify spiritual truths. In "Holy Sonnet XIII," he reveals the importance of the literal image of the cross to the life of the believer, declaring his need to constantly confront his soul with the work of Christ by purposeful recollection of the image of the crucified Christ: "Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell, / The picture of Christ crucified" (2-3). For Donne, images and objects that visually orient the believer to the cross are necessary

for the believer's moment-by-moment sanctification, as they provide constant reminders of not only Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, but also his ongoing work in the life of the believer. In fact, he suggests, for the believer, such images are a matter of identity with Christ. "Since Christ embrac'd the Crosse it selfe, dare I / His image, th' image of his Crosse deny?" he asks in the opening lines of "The Crosse" (1-2), questioning the audacity of the believer who would so dishonor the work of the cross in daring to refuse to embrace its image in his life. "Then doth the Crosse of Christ worke faithfully / Within our hearts, when wee love harmlessly / The Crosses pictures much," he concludes, affirming the ongoing work of the cross upon the believer constantly preoccupied with the cross (61-3). For the cross to "worke faithfully / within our hearts," the believer must "love harmlessly / The Crosses pictures much." Donne placed no distinction between the physical cross of Christ and images of the cross in their ability to transform the hearts of believers; the only proper response from a believer that truly understands the work of the cross is to love both cross and cross-image.

For Donne, objects and images, whether secular or sacred, possessed a certain utility in their ability to constantly draw human attention to spiritual matters and properties capable of aiding in worship. In "A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going to Germany," through symbols that naturally linked the Anglican Sacraments of Communion and Baptism, he declares his desire to find in common objects constant reminders of Christ's redemptive work on his behalf:

In what torne ship soever I embarke
That ship shall be my embleme of thy Arke;

What sea soever swallow mee, that flood

Shall be to mee an embleme of thy bloode. (1-4)

Donne's desire to fill his mind with the things of God was insatiable; he could never surround himself with too many reminders of spiritual matters. To Donne, objects, images, and symbols could function best as communicators of profound spiritual truth.

His search for these common, poignant reminders of spiritual matters resulted from a view of objects and images as elements of divine provision, given for the purpose of clarifying truth. In his writings, Donne refers to these objects as "Hieroglyphicks," means of communicating through symbol. One of the most satisfying symbols in nature for expressing spiritual matters was the circle, a motif whose didactic potential Donne explains in his sermon, "At St. Pauls upon Christmas Day in the Evening, 1624":

One of the most convenient Hieroglyphicks of God, is a Circle; and a Circle is endlesse; whom God loves, hee loves to the end: and not onely to their own end, to their death, but to his end, and his end is, that he might love them still. His hailestones, and his thunder-bolts, and his showres of bloud (emblemes and instruments of his Judgements) fall downe in a direct line, and affect and strike some one person, or place: His Sun, and Moone, and Starres, (Emblemes and Instruments of his Blessings) move circularly, and communicate themselves to all. (6)

The circle, without beginning or end in its structure, offers the ideal structure for illustrating the infinity of God and contrasting infinity with the linear finiteness of God's creation. "Fix upon God anywhere and you shall find him a circle. He is with you now,

when you fix upon him; he was with you before, for he brought you to this fixation, and he will be with you hereafter," he states in the Second of his Prebend Sermons upon the Psalms (2). "God hath wrapped up all things in Circles, and then a Circle hath no Angles; there are no Corners in a Circle," he states in a 1627 sermon preached at Whitehall (4-5). For Donne, the circle best expressed transcendent themes. "Eternall God," Donne prays, "(for whom who ever dare / Seeke new expressions doe the Circle square, / And thrust into strait corners of poore wit / Thee, who are cornerless and infinite)" ("Upon the translation," 1-4). Even wit, for Donne the highest extension of human understanding and ingenuity, failed to express God's infinity adequately; such matters are best centralized in an infinite structure.

Donne felt particularly drawn to the use of a circle as an expression of prayer, a concept he describes in a sermon delivered at St. Paul's Cathedral. In this sermon, which focuses on the matter of prayer, Donne comments upon the infinite structure of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew:

That Prayer which our Saviour gave us, (for as he meant to give us all for asking, so he meant to give us the words by which we should ask) As that Prayer consists of seven petitions, and seven is infinite, [. . .] it is made a circle of praise, and a circle is infinite too, The Prayer, and the Praise is equally infinite. Infinitely poore and needy man, that never needst infinite things to pray for; Infinitely rich and abundant man, that ever hast infinite blessings to praise God for. (4)

Donne identifies features in the structure of the Lord's Prayer that he also identified in the rosary sequence: a pre-existing text ("the words by which we should ask") and a division of petitions within a structure – a circle, to be precise – that accommodates infinity. The rosary's pre-existing text and structural infinity facilitated worship that best imitated the structure and nature of prayerful worship in which Christ instructs his followers. For Donne, the "formes of joy and art" in the cyclic structure of the Rosary provided ideal means to clarify infinite spiritual truths otherwise ungraspable to finite human minds, all the while leading the worshiper in unceasing meditation on spiritual matters.

2. THAT WHICH ALWAYS IS ALL: THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

This structural design that allowed for the figurative formation of a crown and for the emphasis of beauty in worship was particularly attractive to Donne. In *La Corona*, Donne dealt with the errors of doctrine and the problems with veneration his Reformed contemporaries identified in the rosary by his use of the rosary in *La Corona* – a use that suggests that, if the rosary centered the worshiper's meditations upon accepted matters of Christology, the structure could draw the believer into meaningful communion with Christ. Donne's use of the rosary for these purposes remained true to the Roman Catholic rosary's practical purposes, as described by Anne Winston-Allen: "In practical terms, the rosary, by rehearsing the tenets of the faith, served to reinforce orthodoxy and combat heresy" (28). For Donne, *La Corona* both reinforced orthodoxy and combated heresy in highlighting the praiseworthiness of Christ.

With the first sonnet, "Corona," and the clarification of Donne's devotional concern, the meditation shifts to a progressive consideration of Christ, beginning with the announcement of his conception to his mother ("Annunciation"), continuing with his humble birth ("Nativity") and his miraculous childhood ("Temple"), then building with his atoning death ("Crucifying"), and climaxing with his astonishing resurrection from death and victorious ascension into heaven ("Resurrection" and "Ascension"). By the end of "Ascension," the speaker again considers his devotional purpose, first introduced in "Corona"; he reaffirms his need for the work of the Holy Spirit in his worship, thus beginning the cycle of meditation again. A believer using the rosary structure to consider Christ would literally enter into ceaseless meditation upon Christ and redemption.

Donne found the rosary structure to be an ideal tool to aid the believer in careful reflection upon individual events within the life of Christ. When Donne wrote *La Corona*, the rosary mysteries were arranged into three types: joyful mysteries, sorrowful mysteries, and glorious mysteries. Each mystery category involved a grouping of five meditations, each which considered a specific facet of the life of Christ. The sonnets of *La Corona* each correspond directly with the rosary mysteries, with the exception of the first sonnet, which would then correspond with the introductory prayers and Aves. Of the remaining sonnets, "Annunciation," "Nativity," and "Temple" correspond to the joyful mysteries; "Crucifying" to the sorrowful mysteries; and "Resurrection" and "Ascension" to the glorious mysteries. The rosary's division into decades walks the worshiper through the life and person of Christ.

The repeating beginning and ending sonnet lines offer structural support that contributes unity, progression, and infinity to the sequence. The last line of each sonnet concludes the meditation, and its repetition as the first line of the next sonnet introduces the meditation of the next sonnet, linking the new meditation with that explored in the previous sonnet, and building upon the previous. When the speaker concludes “Corona” declaring that “*Salvation to all that will is nigh*” (14), he voices an invitation of salvation for any thirsty soul that will partake of it. When he begins “Annunciation” with the same line, however, he does not simply announce the general offer of salvation for individual, thirsty souls; he considers the arrival of salvation in the form of the newly conceived Christ, the subject of his next sonnet. When he concludes “Annunciation” with “*Immensity cloysterd in thy deare wombe,*” he considers the helplessness of the newly conceived Christ that develops into the reception of the newly arrived Christ in “Nativitie.” In this manner he proceeds through the remaining sonnets of the sequence, concluding and beginning sonnets with lines that create multiple dimensions of meaning. The crown-like structure of *La Corona* accomplishes precisely what the Roman Catholic rosary similarly accomplished: structured, progressive, sustained meditation. And, proceeding from Donne’s supplication for the presence of Christ, it avoids the idolatry associated with rosary meditation. Simply, elegantly, reverently, *La Corona* concentrates the devotion of one worshiper upon Christ, the object of worship.

Early Roman Catholic congregants had found in symbolic images and objects an aid for their worship: an image or object was symbolic, the visible representation of

invisible matters of their faith. Paintings depicting the Holy Family, Crucifixes displaying the crucified form of Christ, cathedral layouts designed to imitate the structure of the cross, or statues of a biblical figures directed worshipers' thoughts to Christ Himself, to his miraculous birth to human parents, and to the display of God's works through human instruments; these images and objects poignantly aided human worshipers in understanding incomprehensible divine truths and conditions. "This was religion mediated through sense," explains Patrick Collinson, "especially the sense of sight" (189). For the Roman Catholic Church, authentic worship involved the entire person, body, sense, and soul.

Protestant Reformers insisted, however, that congregants revered the symbolic representation of the essence equally to the essence; and so reactionary were their efforts to distance themselves from this error that certain Reformers taught that even images of Christ that the worshiper might form in his mind's eye were idolatrous. "So soone as the minde frames unto it selfe any forme of God (as when he is popishly conceived to be like an old man sitting in heaven in a throne with a sceptre in his hand) an idol is set up in the minde. . . . A thing faigned in the mind by imagination is an idol," explained the Puritan theologian William Perkins (qtd. in Sands, 240). Any form of adornment or symbol in worship, even one as inconsequential as the worshiper's stirred imaginings, threatened to lead the worshiper down idolatrous paths.

Unlike Perkins, Donne loved the use of structure and symbol in worship. These elements he felt deepened the believer's worship experience by aiding the worshiper's limited understanding of scriptural matters and truth, thus enabling greater authenticity

and meaning in worship. These elements are “borne apt,” lured away from their original allegiance to God only through human misuse, as Donne explains in “The Litanie”:

That learning, thine Ambassador,
From thine allegiance wee never tempt,
That beauty, paradises flower
For physicke made, from poyson be exempt,
That wit, borne apt, high good or doe,
By dwelling lazily
On Natures nothing, be not nothing too,
That our affections kill us not, nor dye .[. . .] (235-243)

Learning, God’s ambassador, can betray God; beauty, the health-giving flower of Paradise, can poison; and wit, born to do high good, can come to nothing. And yet, in the same instance, the soul cannot fail first to recognize learning as a God-sent ambassador, beauty as a soul-healing manifestation of paradise, and wit as born to do good. In these matters, one must “get not a slipperiness, / And senselessly decline” (221-2). Certainly, in resisting this tension between structure and the substance revealed in structure, Donne felt “the agonie of pious wits, / Disputing what distorted thee” (164-5). For Donne, the structure, a cyclic corona, best functioned when clarifying Christ, and aiding the worshiper’s response to him.

In the corona structure Donne also finds means to fulfill the believer’s exhortation to “pray without ceasing” (I Thess. 5:17). For the Roman Catholic Church of

the sixteenth century, such ceaseless prayer was encouraged through the ubiquitous presence of religious symbols, rituals, and ceremonies; these elements would remind congregants to constantly “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God,” as St. Paul admonished the Colossian believers drawn into the Gnostic controversy (Col. 3:1). The soul in *La Corona*, once set on the course of worship and meditation, does not cease to reflect upon Christ; if followed continuously, the circuit of worship would lead the worshiper in endless worship. In profound figurative means, Donne facilitates the ceaseless prayer and worship that St. Paul instructs every believer to render Christ.

The model of worship Donne develops in *La Corona* follows that found in scripture, where worship is shown to be a whole-person response to one’s knowledge of God, a response that involves the giving of one’s entire life in worship. In Romans 1:12, Saint Paul instructs believers to render their “reasonable service” or worship, in response to “the mercies of God,” pointing to the merciful character of God as the basis for Christian service and sacrifice. In John 4, Christ discusses worship with his disciples, explaining that “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (4:24). Worship, as established in the scriptures, must originate from the truth of God and is therefore possible only by knowing this truth.

While matters concerning worship practices have preoccupied Christian controversies over the centuries, biblical worship modeled in the scriptures consistently focuses the attention of worshipers on the believer’s spiritual understanding and response: more than outward behavior, worship involves an inward, spiritual response

to God. The prophet Isaiah, glimpsing the holiness of God in His holy temple, could respond to God with nothing other than overwhelming worship: “Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5). The prophet was overcome with worship in a clearer understanding of God’s holiness and his own sinfulness. Likewise, for the soul in *La Corona*, worship begins with the first glimpse of Christ upon the throne in “Corona” and continues in reverent journey through the life of Christ. The centrality of Christ in *La Corona* cannot be mistaken for a mere Christian orthodoxy; it forms the soul of worship, without which Donne could not develop a spiritually affective worship sequence of any consequence to believers.

Therefore, Donne appropriately begins his meditational sequence focusing upon the adoration of Christ. The elegant unfolding of the story of redemption, the striking imagery and profound simplicity, the emotional evocativeness of the cycle – all display the beauty of God, inviting fellow worshipers to “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (Psalm 96:9). The aesthetic capabilities of the rosary provided the ideal means for accomplishing this.

For the medieval worshiper, enhancement of worship rituals and elements were a matter of appropriately responding to a majestic God whose majesty surpassed the limitations of human understanding. Towering cathedrals with ornate interiors, elaborate stained glass masterpieces, frescos and paintings of the world’s renowned art masters – the most elaborate adornment was simple in relation to the greatness of God, but a nonetheless fitting response, necessary to the soul of a worshiper wishing to

reflect divine magnificence. “How brave are those,” Donne declares in a later poem, “who with their Engine, can / Bring man to heaven, and heaven againe to man?” (“Mr. Tilman,” 47-8) For the common worshiper whose contact with such physical splendor would likely be infrequent at best, the experiential beauty of worship was able to “bring heaven to man,” literally overwhelming the worshiper’s senses in a manner that brought heavenly matters to a level of human experience, thus bringing “man to heaven” in evoking reverence for God. In his *Lawes*, Richard Hooker explained the powerful capabilities of beauty in worship, asking, “How can we come to the house of prayer, and not be moved with the verie glorie of the place it selfe, so to frame our affections prayinge, as doth best beseeme them, whose sutes thalmightie doth there sitt to heare, and his angels attend to funder?” (114)

Inherent to the structure of *La Corona* is an elaborate metaphor through which he elevates worship to an appropriate view of Christ. In the first sonnet of the sequence, “Corona,” the speaker identifies four central crowns from which he builds a multiple-layered crown metaphor that establishes the Christ-centered concerns of his meditation. Donne introduces the four crowns within the sonnet’s first octet:

Deigne at my hands this crown of prayer and praise,
Weav’d in my low devout melancholie,
Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury,
All changing unchang’d Ancient of days,
But doe not, with a vile crown of fraile bayes,
Reward my muses white sincerity,

But what thy thorny crowne gain'd, that give mee,

A crowne of Glory, which doth flower alwayes. ("Corona," 1-8)

Donne's four crowns – the crown of prayer and praise, the vile crown of frail bays, the thorny crown, and the crown of glory – all develop a unique relationship between his soul and Christ; from this point, Donne establishes Christ himself, not the corona, as the object of worship and the source of goodness.

The four crowns Donne involves in "Corona" develop the person of the worshiper as one acutely aware of his sinful, human condition; and his first request that Christ "deign" his crown of prayer and praise conveys his humility. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *deign* in two senses at once contrasting and complementary: in the first, as the action of condescending to accept; and in the second, as the action of condescending to give. In both senses, condescension figures centrally: Donne, the humble worshiper, beseeches Christ to condescend to him in his offering of prayer and praise. Donne realizes that his offering, no matter its beauty or intentions, falls short of Christ; he must ask Christ to stoop, or condescend, to receive the offering he presents. Employing the second, complementary sense, "conscend to give," Donne does not request Christ's recognition of poetic excellence or spiritual achievement in his crown of prayer and praise; rather, he seeks divine involvement in his worship and meditation: "Thou crown'st our ends" ("Corona," 9). Donne recognizes the insufficiency of his praise offered to an infinite God, and he seeks earnestly for God's blessing to crown, or sanctify, his praise.

Through the four crowns in "Corona," Donne implies the serious nature of his undertaking as the poet-worshiper, establishing the success of his undertaking as possible only through divine involvement. He shows that no human means, however well intended or structured, can adequately satisfy devotional demands without divine involvement. Like Milton, who would invoke the Muse in his task "to justify the ways of God to men" through his epic *Paradise Lost*, Donne expresses the gravity of his task as one that necessitates the involvement of the Muses; and, as clarified in "Ascension," the involvement of the Muses raised by the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, whom St. Paul describes as one that "searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God" (I Cor. 2:10).

Strangely, he requests a reward for his Muse: "But doe not, with a vile crown of fraile bayes, /Reward my muses white sincerity" (5-6). Surpassing the strangeness of his original request for a reward is the addendum to his request: He does not wish to be rewarded the temporal crown of bays, but presumes to request a crown of glory; and, stranger still, not simply any crown of glory, but the one earned by Christ's thorny crown: "But what thy thorny crowne gain'd, that give mee, / a Crowne of glory, which doth flower alwayes" ("Corona," 7-8). His petition seems audacious, yet he can rightfully request a crown of glory as reward for his meditation if the substance and generator of his meditation is Christ. Donne's request for the crown of glory links the tone of his meditation with divine presence.

The sequence of *La Corona* is itself the image, no less impacting than the typical metaphysical conceit. In fact, it is arguably more powerful since it invokes not only

image and object, but also the worshiper's experience. *Corona*, literally *rosary* or *crown*, creates the image of a crown, the structure of the sequence, imitating another crown, the Roman Catholic rosary. Both crowns, Donne's literary crown of prayer and praise and the Roman Catholic rosary-crown of prayer and praise, structurally link to metaphorically invite the worshiper to remain in ceaseless worship of Christ. This spiritual crown of prayer and praise is the crown that Donne wishes crowned with Christ's own crown of glory in a fashion suitable for the beautification of Christ, who is appropriately worshiped in the exaltation of the beauty of his redemptive work. The greater structural vehicle, the rosary-like crown of sonnets, engages the first tenor, the actual rosary sequence of prayer and praise. Yet in the same instance, this first tenor functions as a vehicle for another and greater tenor, the speaker's actual meditation on Christ, guided by the first vehicle, the structure, thus naturally perpetuating a reinforced presence of this last tenor. For the believer, Christ is the ultimate crown; his crowning work results in the formation of more Christ-crowned crowns of prayer and praise with which the believer continually crowns him. With typical metaphysical density, Donne employs not double or even triple imagery, but multiple-leveled imagery: a crowned crown within a crowned, crown-like crown. For Donne, no form of worship, however well-structured or executed, can surpass the worthiness of Christ, the substance of worship.

3. LO, FAITHFUL VIRGIN: A NECESSARY CONCERN

In reverent tones, Donne involves an issue of central Reformation controversy, one inherent to his use of the rosary: the role of the Virgin Mary in the life of Christ.

Salvation to all that will is nigh,
That All, which alwayes is All every where,
Which cannot sinne, and yet all sinnes, must beare,
Which cannot die, yet cannot chuse but die,
Loe, faithfull Virgin, yeelds himselfe to lye
In prison, in thy wombe. (“Annunciation,” 1-6)

In this section of *La Corona*, Donne’s meditation takes a controversial turn when he directly addresses the Virgin Mary, an action that would be immediately interpreted by Reformed contemporaries as idolatrous. To Protestant Reformers, Mariolatry was inherent to the rosary: according to Marian legend, the Virgin herself delivered the rosary to St. Dominic; its decades were structured by Aves directed to the Virgin; and its circuitry was designed to form a spiritual crown of roses to beautify the Virgin. Mariolatry constituted one of the most contentious features of the Roman Catholic rosary and, by extension, *La Corona*. In his involvement of the rosary in *La Corona*, Donne could scarcely have expected to avoid the issue of Mariolatry.

His address to the Virgin handles the issue delicately but deliberately, revealing greater devotional utility in the stead of controversy. Far from intimidated by the complexities of this matter, Donne recognized that the worship rendered the Virgin in church tradition could not alter her important role in the life of Christ, nor the honor of

her special calling from God. To him, the Virgin could be properly honored and, most significantly, could aid the believer's understanding of Christ.

He constructs his thoughts carefully in *La Corona*; in other instances within his sacred literature, Donne is bolder when speaking of the Virgin, stating in "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward,"

If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus
Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us? (29-33)

Such sentiments, which seem to assign saving power to Mary, surely trespass into Mariolatry. However, Donne's expression in the "Goodfriday" passage, embedded in an equally metaphorical description of the believer's interaction with the image of Christ, contains more of imagery and hyperbole than of actual Mariolatry; elsewhere, he expresses in far stronger tones his sentiments concerning those actually caught up in Mariolatry. "So all the rest of them, both in that respect, of sucking blood, and occasioning massacres, and other respects too, are rather Marianists than Jesuits, Idolaters of the blessed Virgin Mary, then worshippers of Jesus," Donne explains in the fourth of his Prebend Sermons upon the Psalms, speaking of the Jesuits and those of the Roman Catholic Church who bear in title the name Jesus, but in action another name (10).

Nevertheless, Donne felt that Mary could not, and should not, be avoided simply because her God-given role in redemption had elicited the worship of congregants; for

only by divine miracle was Mary able to mother the Son of God. Worthy of honor, but not of worship, she was faithful, but fallible, imparting flesh, subject to death's force, to her Son. In "Annunciation," Donne sets out to honor the Virgin and to spiritually glean from her miraculous relationship with Christ. His address of the Virgin is one of the most daunting features of *La Corona*, but he handles the matter by driving the focus of the meditation to Christ, "*Immensity cloyster'd in thy deare wombe*" ("Annunciation," 14).

In order to highlight the remarkable sacrifice involved in Incarnation, "Annunciation" begins Donne's consideration of Christ's humanity from the perspective of Christ's mother. The majestic Christ that the speaker humbly worships with prayer and praise in "Corona" becomes the frail, unborn child in "Annunciation," imprisoned within the womb of His mother, a frail human being. The worshiper in *La Corona*, like a rosary devotee, considers with wonder the significance of this arrangement. *A Breefe directory* instructs worshipers specifically to imagine the announcement of this event in the encounter between Mary and the Angel Gabriel, as Gabriel greets Mary with the news of Christ's conception: "And howe that on a soden the Angel Gabriel appeared unto her in glorious shining brightnes, saluting her with Hayle Mary full of grace." The soul, like Mary hearing these words, should be overcome by the news of God's arriving in human flesh.

The throne of the crowned divine Christ depicted in "Corona" offers stark contrast to the dark imprisonment of the womb, the central image developed in "Annunciation." In an ironic shift from the glorification of the Virgin in rosary

meditation, the worshiper considers the severity of Christ's arrival through the Virgin. It was not enough that Christ simply "yeelds himself," but that he furthermore yields himself "to lye / In prison, in thy wombe" ("Annunciation," 5-6). The image the soul considers is a striking one: for what could be more surprising than the notion that Christ's virgin mother, the faithful vessel appointed by God as the bearer of God's Son, should function as a prison for her unborn Son? This understanding of the womb as a prison is entirely unnatural; it horribly contrasts the universal conception of the womb as a warm, nurturing environment for the unborn. Nothing of a prison could possibly resemble the womb of the mother that God chose to bear his son.

And yet, the image of the womb as a prison was not one uncommon to Donne; he employed it, probably most famously, in his last sermon, "Deaths Duell." "Neither is there any *grave* so close, or so *putrid* a *prison*," he states, "as the *wombe* would be unto us if we stayed in it *beyond* our time" (4). In a greater sense still, the image of the prison yielded the ideal means for conceptualizing the incarnate Christ's earthly arrival; and Donne's artistry in employing this image for expressing the miracle of the Incarnation cannot be denied. Just as no location should offer so unfitting a place for the unborn as a prison, no means of arrival could provide less ideal containment of deity than that of a womb, no matter how sanctified or devoted; and no form could offer so unfitting a form for deity as that of a human. The speaker must show in the most striking of terms that Christ's assumption of human flesh could not possibly be more surprising or unnatural an action or form for deity, nor could a form better display the miracle of deity Incarnate. For the soul at worship in *La Corona*, whether Christ arrives in the womb of

the Virgin Mary, or whether he arrives in prison is an unnecessary distinction to make; the point is that God arrives in flesh.

Donne chooses a significant verb to convey the action of Christ's Incarnation, stating that Christ "yeelds himselfe to lye / In prison" ("Annunciation," 5-6). The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists multiple definitions of the word *yield* which inflect the meaning of the worshiper's meditation on Christ's human arrival. In one sense, according to the *OED*, *yield* means "to give as due or of right," or even "to give in payment" (n. pag.); while, in another sense common to usage in Donne's era, *yield* also means "to bring forth, give birth to bear (offspring)" (n. pag.). In typical metaphysical fashion, Donne was likely employing both senses of the word to expand his meaning to the fullest extent: Christ yielded himself, or gave himself over, in surrender of his deity, following the first sense of the word. However, perhaps more intricately, he also *yields Himself*; or, in the second sense of the word, brings Himself to birth, allowing Himself to be birthed by a human mother. The reading of this knotty line follows the context established by the previous lines in which Christ lays aside his deity and, by act of will, assumes human form. In this sense, he is the bearer of Himself, and he becomes his own offspring.

The use of this verb provides appropriate context for Donne's explanation of Christ's surprising relationship with his mother, the foreground of his Marian concern: It is just as great a miracle for Christ to bear Himself as it is for Him to be borne by a human mother. In fact, it would be more fitting for Him to bear Himself than for His mother to bear Him since, as deity, He pre-exists -- and, for that matter, births -- His

own mother, a paradoxical relationship Donne describes in the remaining lines of the sonnet.

Ere by the spheares time was created, thou
Wast in his minde, who is thy Sonne, and Brother,
Whom thou conceiv'st, conceiv'd; yea, thou art now
Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mother,
Thou'hast light in darke; and shutst in little roome,
Immensity cloysterd in thy deare wombe. ("Annunciation," 9-14)

Donne depicts this relationship in an elaborate construction that allows the soul to understand the complexity of Christ's human relations. Christ the Son, whose later work of redemption allowed believing man to become children of the Father God, is his mother's Brother (10). She conceives Him, but He first conceived her (11). He, as Creator, was her Maker; yet she, as his mother, made him human (12). He, as God, was her Father; but she was his human mother (12). Christ's relationship with his human mother provided greater means for displaying the miraculous transformations that had to occur for the Incarnation to take place: the Creator had to be made, the Father had to be fathered. Christ's human relationship to his mother is just as perplexing and miraculous as the act of deity yielding himself to assume the form of man. To Donne, Mary in her relationship with Christ could not more clearly evince the miracle of the Incarnation. Christ's yielding of His limitless deity was remarkable enough; much more so his yielding of his boundlessness in exchange for the imprisonment of the womb.

The next lines of “Annunciation” explore an additional side of Mary’s contribution to the incarnation: “and though he there / Can take no sinne, nor thou give, yet he’ will weare / Taken from thence, flesh, which deaths force may trie” (6-8). While the worshiper realizes that Christ cannot take sin from his mother’s womb – a point handling the humanity of the Virgin in terms agreeable to both Catholics and Protestants – he identifies the womb as the location that imparts to Christ flesh, the one element he, in his deity, does not possess. This one element, the worshiper indicates, subjects Christ to the ultimate subjection humanity experiences, the trial of death (8).

The worshiper in Donne’s rosary sequence handles his consideration of Christ’s maternal relationship in a manner that undeniably distances Donne’s literary rosary from the suspect Mariolatry of the Roman Catholic rosary, all the while reconstructing a Christ-centered consideration of Marian placement within the Incarnation. His direct address of the Virgin departed from the rosary prayers beseeching the blessing, intercession, and deliverance of Mary. “Mary who art mother of grace and mother of mercy,” the devotee prays in *A Breefe Directory*, supplicating the mother of Christ for deliverance and acceptance at the end of life, “defende vs from our enemies and receiue vs at the houre of our Death.” In “Annunciation,” and throughout the rest of the sequence, Donne periodically addresses the mother of Christ; however, rather than seeking the protection and deliverance of the Virgin, his addresses ultimately convey the supremacy of the Son.

Donne’s address to Mary differs in *La Corona* from the Roman Catholic prayers and worship offered to Mary in the absence of Marian exaltation; rather than realizing

in Mary a means to achieve salvation, Donne realizes in her a means to know the person of salvation, her Son Christ. The soul should consider the role of the Virgin in the story of Christ, Donne suggests, as Mary provides one of the most unassuming and unusual means in which God displayed the brilliant miracle of His Incarnation. Marveling over the miracle of Christ's conception, the soul seems to express perhaps some of the very perplexities Mary herself may have marveled over as she carried Christ: "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Donne communicates his ponderings within the immediacy of the present tense; his intimate consideration of these events had no need to account for time.

Essentially, Donne's address to the mother of Christ serves the greater purpose of revealing Christ himself. Controversies aside, Donne's interplay with the Virgin communicates truths entirely acceptable to both Roman Catholics and Protestants. He finds in the miracle of the human mother the means to show his audience the greater miracle of the divine Son, the humble circumstances and connections of the human carrier to reveal the wonder and magnificence of the divine sacrifice.

In "A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going to Germany," Donne depicts a similar irony in the ability of restrictive darkness to sharpen the believer's perception of God only in worship: "Churches are best for Prayer, that have least light: / To see God only, I goe out of sight" (Patrides 29-30). In the same sense, the darkness of the womb, like a dark church suited for prayer, best displays the miraculous light of Christ. The humble virgin that Donne addresses in *La Corona* is far from the soul-saving, divine church Matriarch Reformers wished to purge from the church; she provided a flesh-

imparting, sorrowing, outcast means of materializing Christ's earthly existence. Like the soul, the reading audience ought to be caught up in wonder over the miracle that God should choose a frail human vehicle to manifest himself in such a profound, human form.

4. SEEST THOU, MY SOUL? THE SOUL AT WORSHIP

In addition to finding in the crown-structure of the rosary a powerful metaphor in which to express Christ-centered devotion, Donne also relies on the structure to trace the soul's journey with Christ. The soul emerges within the first lines of the sequence with Donne's original request, "*Deigne at my hands. . .*," assuming first the role of humble giver, but immediately after the role of lowly receiver. He has not assembled his gift of prayer and praise easily; it is one crafted meticulously, "Weav'd in my low devout melancholie" ("Corona," 2). However, he offers his gift to Christ, the source of all goodness, with the intention of knowing the goodness of Christ: "Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury, / All changing unchang'd Ancient of days" ("Corona," 3-4). Not only does Christ possess a treasury of good ("Thou which of good, hast"), but He is, in fact, the very storehouse of good ("yea art treasury"). Donne recognizes that his offering to Christ cannot increase the good Christ already possesses since Christ is not only the possessor of good, but the source of goodness itself.

In this construction, Donne centralizes the exchange that occurs within meaningful worship: the soul of the worshiper can offer nothing to Christ, but must

instead draw upon Christ in order to present worship that is of any spiritual value. St. Paul writes of this matter to the Corinthian believers, explaining the emptiness of the believer apart from Christ: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” (II Cor. 4:7). On his own, the worshiper is an empty and valueless vessel; but this is the precisely the believer through which God most clearly manifests his glory.

Just as St. Paul explains of the believer’s natural emptiness, Christ’s fullness, and the believer’s subsequent fullness in Christ, the soul in *La Corona* approaches Christ with nothing and receives, instead, everything – even a crown of glory. The soul assumes the role of giver and offers praise to the Recipient of his devotion, Christ: “*Deigne at my hands this crown of prayer and praise*” (“Corona,” 1). The giver can offer these gifts, but he simultaneously only can accept the Recipient’s gifts to him: “But what thy thorny crowne gain’d, that give mee, / A crowne of Glory, which doth flower alwayes” (“Corona,” 7-8). Thus, the giver, or speaker of the sonnet, is actually the recipient; the Recipient, Christ, is actually the giver. Donne artistically imitates the reciprocal arrangement of this exchange through the circular structure of his sonnet sequence. Donne the giver is, in reality, Donne the receiver; Christ the receiver is, unquestionably, Christ the giver.

With this understanding, the soul begins a journey with Christ that will consider the work of Christ from the angel’s announcement of his conception to his mother Mary (“Annunciation”) to the celebration of his entrance into heaven (“Ascension”), then begin to reconsider it all again: “‘Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high, / Salvation

to all that will is nigh" ("Corona," 13-14). The arrival of Christ has impacted the heart of the worshiper, and the worshiper cannot refrain from verbally praising and declaring the newly arrived salvation.

What begins as a soul's offering of worship continues as a soul's realization of need: "With a strong sober thirst, my soule attends," (12); and the soul begins its journey knowing Christ as the fulfiller of that need: "The ends crowne our workes, but thou crown'st our ends, / For, at our end begins our endlesse rest, / The first last end, now zealously possesst" (9-11). The speaker's mentioning of the "first last end" follows a series of word-play involving a variety of ends. In the particular end mentioned in these lines, the first last end, the speaker likely refers to the passion of Christ who, with his death, the first last end, ended death, the last end, for the first time, and thus provided the means to defeat, and thus end, the last end for every believer. The soul declares his intentions to attend to this first last end with "a strong sober thirst," a compelling, well-informed sense of need. He cannot avoid his need -- it is strong; the condition of his soul is poor and thirsty, and he will quench his spiritual thirst in the matters of Christ's passion to which he attends.

Thus, transported into the next sonnet by the interlocking concluding and beginning lines, the soul continues its journey with the newly conceived Christ, the arrival of salvation for all that will: "Salvation to all that will is nigh" ("Annunciation," 1). With this invitation, Donne makes a daring move for his context within the Reformation in proclamation of a salvation available to "all that will," a non-exclusive invitation. In depicting salvation accessible through human will, Donne would surely have invited

contention from a Reformed audience struggling to define a theology of election and atonement. His Calvinist audience, especially those sensitive to the supralapsarian teachings of Theodore Beza and William Perkins, who insisted upon a model of double-predestination, the election of souls either to salvation or to damnation, likely would have objected to the autonomy of such an invitation. The theology and resulting practices of the Reformed Church stood perceivably opposed to the openness of the invitation Donne issues in this last line; nevertheless, Donne, so focused upon the arrival of the Savior, seems hardly affected by his audience's persuasion and unapologetically declares his invitation with boldness that risked arousing reactions from his contemporaries. Consistent with his efforts throughout the rest of the sequence, he directs his audience to the focal point of faith, Christ, "that All, which alwayes is All every where" ("Annunciation," 2).

The soul, captivated by this arrival of God in human flesh in "Annunciation" now shifts his meditation to consider salvation in the form of Christ, the newly conceived child. No longer does the soul's meditation on salvation involve a general concept; it involves a specific person; it is nigh, not only in that it is available to all that will receive it, but because it has arrived in human form. Through the actually present Christ, the soul can personally know salvation.

From the arrival of salvation in the form of the infant Christ, the soul's journey clarifies the believer's journey to know Christ. *La Corona* differs from Donne's other religious writings in the simplicity of his consideration of Christian mysteries and paradox. While he realizes the paradoxical nature of the incarnate Christ, he seeks not

to understand those contrasts, but rather to find in them the substance of his worship. Donne shows that worship involves active seeking after Christ, reverencing the beauty of his arrival; that worship, in its essence, is a journey of knowing and magnifying Christ. Above all, *La Corona* celebrates the knowable Christ, God in human form, the miraculous Incarnation.

In the opening lines of “Annunciation,” the worshiper realizes the paradoxical existence of the limitless God confined to human flesh. The worshiper’s meditations have led him to consider the nature of Christ as described in St. Paul’s epistle to the Colossians: “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: [. . .] and by him all things consist” (1:16-7). Christ’s very being contends with the constraints of time and space, as suggested by line two in “Annunciation,” and by the lines describing Christ’s relationship with his mother in the latter half of the octet: “Ere by the spheares time was created, thou / Wast in his minde” (“Annunciation,” 9-10). While space and time preexisted the mother of Christ, Christ himself preexisted the creation of all three: space, time, and his mother. It is of little wonder, then, that the worshiper in *La Corona* begins his consideration of the incarnation of Christ with as broad and profound a title as “All.” He must first describe the boundlessness of the pre-incarnate Christ before showing the extremity of the limitations Christ underwent in his *kenosis*, or self-emptying.

The structure of the first quatrain of “Annunciation” captures a paradox of the Incarnation. Each line pairs two antithetical conditions without attempting to reconcile,

or form a synthesis of the two; such a construction suggests the necessity of the surrender of one condition for the other:

That All, which alwayes is All every where,
Which cannot sinne, and yet all sinnes, must beare,
Which cannot die, yet cannot chuse but die,
Loe, faithfull Virgin, yeelds himselfe to lye
In prison, in thy wombe. (2-6)

The soul of the worshiper considers the implications of the supreme act of yielding Christ underwent in the Incarnation. While pre-incarnate Christ, the All that exceeds time and space, cannot die or sin, his assumption of human flesh necessitates his assuming the human experience of sin and death. While, as deity, He cannot die, as humanity, he cannot choose but die (4); and while, as deity, he cannot sin, as humanity, he must bear all sins (3). Donne has carefully expressed the thoughts of the third line, avoiding implication of any sort of peccability in the incarnate Christ. Though no sin was found in Christ, Christ partook of the universal experience of sin by bearing the sins of the world, as prophesied by Isaiah: “and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). The worshiper understands that the deified Christ possesses all of the limitless qualities of deity, but must yield, or temporarily empty himself of, those qualities in order to enter human form. He expresses these thoughts in much more jarring terms in a Christmas Day sermon, 1624, describing the Incarnation as a “smothering” of Divinity: “Remember that our Saviour Christ himselfe, in many actions and passions of our

humane nature, and infirmities, smothered that Divinity, and suffered it not to worke, but yet it was always in him, and wrought most powerfully in the deepest danger; when he was absolutely dead, it raised him again: [. . .] Christ slumbered the God-head in himselfe” (7). Donne realizes the gravity and fullness of the incarnation as an act of sacrifice incomprehensible to the limited human mind.

With the last line of “Annunciation,” the soul encounters Christ, the personification of Immensity; and the image he now considers expresses the extreme reduction divinity underwent in order to arrive as a human, for it involved Christ’s assumption of a human body. The relationship between body and soul was not an unfamiliar fascination for Donne. In “The Extasy,” he describes the body and soul relationship in terms contrasting the ones he uses in *La Corona*:

So must pure lovers soules descend
T’affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies. (65-8)

Unlike lovers’ souls, which must find freedom by descending to physical bodies, Christ’s descent to human existence meant extreme imprisonment.

In “Annunciation,” human Immensity has not yet taken action. *Immensity* functions as the direct object of the verb *shutt’st* in the previous line; it has not yet performed any action. It simply lies still. The same line that concludes “Annunciation” with a construction that anticipates divine action also opens the next sonnet, “Nativitie,” with the performance of the much-anticipated action.

Immensity cloysterd in thy deare wombe,
Now leaves his welbelov'd imprisonment,
There he hath made himselfe to his intent
Weake enough, now into our world to come. (1-4)

Immensity functions in this line as a subject, drawing it to the forefront; and its first human action and choice is to leave the security of the womb, now a beloved imprisonment.

Despite the low circumstances into which he has arrived, the Christ-child leaves the security of the womb. Donne's description of this arrival contrasts that of Ben Jonson's "Cary-Morison Ode," in which the speaker addresses an infant, arriving amidst harsh conditions:

Thou looking then about
Ere thou wert half got out,
Wise child, didst hastily return,
And mad'st thy mother's womb thine urn. (5-8)

Christ, Donne notes, willingly chooses to enter "our world," the sin-cursed human experience. Certainly, like the infant Jonson describes (albeit in ironic terms), Christ as deity could have chosen not to leave the security of the womb, but instead chooses to leave his shelter. The soul considers the exchange of position Christ underwent in the Incarnation, reflecting thoughts similar to those of the couplet ending Holy Sonnet XI: "God clothed Himself in vile man's flesh, that so/He might be weak enough to suffer woe" (13-4). Pondering this miraculous union of divine and human nature, the soul

marvels over the astounding fact of the Incarnation, described by the prophet Isaiah: “Who hath believed our report? [. . .] He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:1-2). The situation of the Incarnation is an overwhelming one for the worshiper to consider: inconceivably human, utterly unbecoming to deity, entirely necessary to the redemption of the human soul.

The soul seems to pause the progression of its meditation briefly to reflect upon the strangeness of the situation he has already considered, insisting that his soul view this miracle with the eye of faith.

Seest thou, my Soule, with thy faiths eyes, how he

Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lye?

Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high,

That would have need to be pittied by thee? (“Nativitie,” 9-12)

Immensity, newly emerged from the womb of his mother, lies helpless, dependent, sought from infancy as either an object of worship or destruction. And as in “Annunciation,” Christ in “Nativitie” yet lies, yielding himself to a prone, vulnerable position.

The soul can scarcely comprehend the strangeness of Christ’s arrival. His depiction of Christ as He “Which fills all place, yet none holds him” (10) presents an admittedly perplexing paradox: Christ, the filler of all place, must by implication also be a containable being since, to be the filler of an object, even an object as large as “all

place," he would need to be contained by the object he fills. "Yet," Donne insists, "none holds Him."

His answer to the problem of the confining womb is to recall Christ's limitless deity: the soul realizes that Christ's immensity as the filler of all things must also be understood as an immensity that is entirely uncontainable. While Christ fills all things, "none holds him"; or, nothing is capable of containing him. Donne's paradoxical construction of the immensity of Christ enhances the miracle of Christ's birth, the All that fills all things, yet cannot be contained, lying contained, first within the womb of his mother ("Annunciation") and then within the form of a frail, human infant ("Nativity").

Most importantly, his meditations have carried him to consider first Christ's self-emptying sacrifice and then his divine fullness, truths that please God the Father, as Isaiah prophesied in the Old Testament, "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him" (53:10); and as Saint Paul describes in his letter to the Colossians, "For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell" (1:19). The matters the soul considers are wholesome truths that increase the soul's love for Christ, as Donne suggests elsewhere in Holy Sonnet XV:

Wilt thou love God, as he thee! then digest,
My Soule, this wholsome meditation [. . .]
The Sonne of glory came downe, and was slaine,
Us whom he'had made, and Satan stolne, to unbind.
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,
But, that God should be made like man, much more. (1+)

“How doth...he lie?” the soul reflectively asks. The answer to this question provokes a second rhetorical question that moves the soul to consider the astounding height of God’s love: “Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high, / That would have need to be pittied by thee?” (12-11) This pity is nothing short of miraculous; it required a shift of cosmic proportions in which the filler of space and matter yielded himself to lie as a human infant.

The soul reflects upon these questions to remind himself of the mysterious implications of these events: not merely that divinity should pity humanity enough to partake in humble human experiences, but that divinity’s “pity towards thee” should be so “wondrous high,” he would himself assume a pitiable low station, a form so pitiable that he himself must receive pity from those he pities. With these two questions, the soul has reached a climax in his meditation of the miraculous entry of God into human form. His meditation upon the Incarnation of Christ thus far has led him to pity the one he worships – a thoroughly unusual response for a worshiper, but one altogether befitting a worshiper considering a sacrifice of such magnitude, demonstrating by effect the severity of the displacement of Christ’s sacrifice.

The interlocking line shared by “Nativitie” and “Temple” (“*With his kinde mother, who partakes thy woe*”) presents a particular matter of reading complexity; for, in the line’s first occurrence, Christ is the subject partaking of the soul’s woe, and in the second occurrence, Joseph is the subject partaking of Mary’s woe. The reading of the first occurrence depends upon the preceding line: “Kisse him, and with him into Egypt goe.” (“Nativitie,” 13-4). The dependent clause of the last line, “*who partakes thy woe,*”

refers to the direct object of line thirteen: “Kisse him.” The *who* that partakes of the soul’s woe is the *him* mentioned in the preceding line. The distant placement of the modifying dependent clause slows the reading of the lines significantly, heightening the surprise of the meaning as a result. Christ actively partakes of the soul’s own woe.

Donne calls his soul to a powerful response to Christ: “Kisse him, and with him into Egypt goe.” (“Nativitie” 13-4). The kiss Donne ponders in these lines is a kiss of acceptance, made more significant in its recollection of another kiss given Christ, the kiss of betrayal Christ received from Judas. His involvement of this infamous kiss suggests the opposite of Judas’ intentions; rather than identify Christ in betrayal, this kiss identifies Christ in adoration. The worshiper’s adoration is a fitting response to Christ; he joins Christ’s mother and father to worship the Son.

Yet, one cannot mistake the simple affection Donne conveys for Christ in this line. Thus far in his meditation, he has observed the unspeakable beauty of Christ’s sacrificial Incarnation, Christ’s yielding of himself to assume a human form, and Christ’s limiting of his deity – ultimately, the love of God demonstrated through the person of God’s Son. Through Christ, the worshiper has recognized the love of God: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (I John 3:16); his response is simple, appropriate, precisely as St. John describes: “We love him, because he first loved us” (I John 4:19). The soul has seen the love of God demonstrated in Christ and can respond with nothing but love for Christ in return.

Centralized in these lines of *La Corona* is one of the most mysterious features of the Incarnation: its demonstration of the love of God in an invitation for man to enter

into a relationship with God – not simply a covenantal relationship such as that of the Old Testament, but a familial relationship, as declared in the New Testament. The worshiper’s soul, first in distant awe in “Corona,” observes more closely the new God-man relationship spawned through the Incarnation in “Annunciation”; and, as his meditations lead him forward, he discovers this relationship himself in “Nativitie”: “Kiss Him, and with Him [. . .] go / With his kind mother” (13). In this single line, the worshiper not only discovers a familial relationship with Christ, but also one of entire identification with Christ.

5. WITH HIM GO: THE JOURNEY

With the close of “Nativitie,” Donne juxtaposes two simultaneous journeys. The first, the journey of the soul, began in “Corona” with the offering of prayer and praise to Christ. The second, Christ’s own journey from heaven to earth in Incarnation, likewise began in “Corona” with the recognition of Christ’s placement as receiver of worship and giver of goodness. However, as “Nativitie” closes and “Temple” opens, the emphasis of each journey intensifies, as the soul’s journey grows ever more responsive to Christ, and Christ’s earthly journey takes him ever close to the Cross.

From considering the conception and birth of Christ, the soul must proceed to consider Christ as a child. “Folowe our Lady and Josephe downe from Jerusalem,” writes the devotee in *A Breefe directory*, “not hauing little Jesus with them, thinking he had bene gone before in company of some of his kindred.” In “Nativitie,” the soul considers the miracle of deity grown to childhood, a profound life stage for deity.

With his kinde mother, who partakes thy woe,
Joseph turn backe; see where your child doth sit,
Blowing, yea blowing out those sparks of wit,
Which himself on the Doctors did bestow ("Temple," 2-4)

Donne's reference to the doctors on whom Christ bestowed wit included, most obviously, the teachers of the law that the Christ child taught at age twelve in the temple; but Donne seems also to wittily include himself and his colleagues with this collection of those with whom Christ discoursed; Dr. John Donne and his contemporaries were familiar with "sparks of wit" and, as he terms in "The Crosse," the "concupiscence of wit" (58). Donne also possibly includes a third group in his allusion, the doctors of the church, or venerated saints that included such esteemed figures as Saint Augustine, Saint Basil, Saint Ambrose, and Saint John of the Cross, all of whom influenced Donne. For Donne, the Christ child imparting wisdom to the wisest leaders of the church as clearly demonstrated the miracle of the Incarnation as any of the other features he had thus far considered.

The last line of the quatrain describing Christ as "a shallow seeming child" involves several subtle complexities created through the ambiguously placed modifier, *seeming*. As a "shallow seeming child," Christ is a child that only seems to be shallow, and possesses the inexhaustible depths of the godhead; yet he is the divine that only seems to be a shallow child. Either reading conveys essentially the same message, but the ambiguity of the modifier slows the reading of the line, and thus the worshiper's meditation, drawing attention to the hidden depth of God in the Christ child. And with

understated wit, Donne playfully hides yet another description of the Christ child within the word *shallow*, a word that means *small*, yet contains *all*.

Thus far, the reader has encountered the newly conceived Christ, the newborn Christ, and the child Christ. Having journeyed with Christ through adulthood in considering the joyful rosary mysteries, the soul enters into a consideration of the sorrowful mysteries, beginning with Christ's unjust rejection and condemnation:

But Oh! the worst are most, they will and can,
Alas, and do, unto the immaculate,
Whose creature Fate is, now prescribe a Fate,
Measuring selfe-lifes infinity to'a span,
Nay to an inch. ("Crucifying," 5-9).

The soul reflects upon the injustices Christ experiences in his Passion: the blameless condemned, the creator of Fate subjected to Fate, the lifespan of the Infinite measured with less than a span. Donne personally found the thought of these injustices to be overwhelming, struggling to grasp the painfulness of the image of God suffering for man:

Yet dare I'almost be glad, I do not see
That spectacle of too much weight for mee.
Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, myst dye;
What a death were it then to see God dye? ("Goodfriday," 15-8)

For a soul fully aware of the implications of this act, such a spectacle is nearly too weighty for consideration. In "Goodfriday," Donne is overcome with the significant of

the painful death of Christ; yet the soul in *La Corona* is transfixed – riveted – upon the image of the suffering Christ, whose sufferings provide the sinner’s redemption.

When the soul first beholds the condemned Christ, Christ is bearing his own cross in the painful procession to the place of execution: “Loe, where condemned hee / Beares his owne crosse, with paine, yet by and by / When it beares him, he must beare more and die” (“Crucifying,” 9-11). Cross and Cross-Bearer reverse as Christ, the bearer of the cross, is borne by the cross that he bore (10). The weight of this irony presses upon the soul as the soul observes the cross-bearer borne by the cross become the bearer of something more, the weight of the world’s sin (11). Whereas Christ bears the cross with pain (10), when the cross bears him, the greatest intensification of his condemnation occurs, and he once again becomes a bearer – not the bearer of the Roman cross, but the bearer of sin, a far greater load than the cross (11). Whereas the former load caused him pain, this load brought him death.

At this climactic moment, the moment where Christ the cross-bearer is borne by the cross, the worshiper calls out to Christ: “Now thou are lifted up, draw mee to thee, / And at thy death giving such liberall dole, / *Moyst, with one drop of thy blood, my dry soule*” (“Crucifying,” 12-14). This moment signals a shift in the worshiper’s meditations from a distant consideration of Christ to a direct approach to Christ as the soul, for the first time since his initial address in “Corona,” directly addresses Christ. In the intervening sonnets of the collection, the soul has directly addressed Christ’s mother Mary (“Annunciation,” 5), Christ’s father Joseph (“Temple,” 2), and even his own soul (“Nativitie,” 9); but his interactions with Christ himself have thus far involved indirect

addresses, observations, and descriptions. At this climax, however, he without hesitation turns his address directly to Christ.

The wording of his address carries multi-layered allusions, each communicating the same essential meaning. First, in a double allusion, he refers to Jesus' words in John 12:32, where Jesus declares his saving power: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." Christ's own words themselves allude to Moses's instructions to the children of Israel as they sought deliverance from deadly serpents in the wilderness. Donne directs his readers to Christ as the sole source of salvation, obtained through simple faith.

Familiar especially to Donne's Roman Catholic audience would also be the second allusion to the moment in the liturgy when the body of Christ -- the Host endowed with the Real Presence of Christ -- was lifted up. This practice, Diarmaid MacCulloch notes in *The Later Reformation in England*, had been left out of the new 1549 Communion service for its associations with the Roman Catholic mass (12). The most sacred moment of the mass, accompanied by ringing bells, this glimpsing of the host was the common congregant's only means of partaking of Communion. In the cases of larger crowds at mass, congregants would often strategically position themselves so that they could see this one moment in the mass, then leave satisfied, believing they had obtained salvation through a glimpse at the sanctified host.

This allusion enables Donne to draw his soul's focus, however, to Christ on the cross rather than to the elevated host at the mass. He emphasizes Christ the deliverer, whose drops of blood possess the power to deliver the souls of men; the worshiper asks

for Christ to give “such liberal dole,” a sufficient and nourishing application of the shed blood to his soul. Between this sonnet, “Crucifying,” and the next, “Resurrection,” the usage of *moyst* within the repeated line shifts to inflect the soul’s condition.

Moyst, with one drop of thy blood, my dry soule,
Shall (thou she now be in extreme degree
Too stony hard, and yet too fleshly,) bee
Freed by that drop, from being starv’d, hard, or foule.
(“Resurrection,” 1- 4)

In “Crucifying,” the speaker employs the word *moist* as a verb, beseeching Christ to moisten his soul with a single drop of His shed blood. In “Resurrection,” *moist* becomes a participle modifying the subject of the sentence, soul. In the former sonnet, the speaker expresses his need for the reviving effects of the blood of Christ upon his soul; in the latter sonnet, the need has been satisfied. His soul, moistened with one drop of Christ’s blood, is rescued from peril.

The irony in these lines lies in the efficacy of a single drop of blood. A stony hard soul – impenetrable – that is nonetheless fleshly, a second form of spiritual impenetrability, is released from starvation, from hardness, and from foulness by a single drop of blood (2-4). To modern readers, sufficiency of this extent would seem hyperbolic; to Donne, however, whose audience included those for whom even a glimpse of a sanctified host sufficed to produce saving grace, or to those for whom simple faith in the atoning cross of Christ freely yielded salvation, the amount of the blood applied to his soul was irrelevant. A single drop sufficed as well as an ocean.

A gesture such as this allusion on Donne's part would certainly have invited contention from his audience; the issue of transubstantiation and the real presence of Christ within the elements figured centrally in Reformation discussion. At the heart of the debate lay the Protestant tenets of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, salvation by grace through faith alone. The knotty doctrine of transubstantiation and its surrounding Reformation controversies resulted from varying understandings of scriptural instructions regarding the reception of Christ for salvation, such as those of St. John in his gospel: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (1:12). For a Roman Catholic, the physical Host and the person of Christ were one and the same substance; ingesting the physical Host was no different from spiritually receiving Christ. Protestants, however, placed a significant distinction, between the physical and spiritual elements. For them, an error of soteriology occurred when congregants accepted for salvation a physical substance, the Eucharist, and not the person and sacrifice the substance represented in them; when an ongoing, symbolic sacrifice of Christ's body was required to accomplish what Christ accomplished once for all. To them, Christ's sacrifice could never be repeated in the ritual. The New Testament book of Hebrews explains, "Not that He should offer Himself often, [. . .] Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many" (9:25, 28).

Article XXVIII of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church, published in 1571, declared the official English church position on the matter of the Eucharist: "Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of bread and wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ, but is repugnant to the plain words of

Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions” (6). The person of Christ alone, regardless of symbol, insisted Reformers, was the conveyor of saving grace; to seek another expression of Christ in transubstantiation was sacrilegious, “repugnant to the plain words of Scripture.” The soul-saving acceptance of Christ lay in spiritually regenerating faith – spiritual consumption of Christ’s spiritual body – rather than in physical consumption of the physical elements.

In the speaker’s desperate call to the elevated Christ in “Crucifying,” Donne was directing his reading audience not to a portion of the liturgy or to a religious symbol, but to the actual Person and shed blood of Christ. For the worshiper in *La Corona*, as for any believer, no Holy Eucharist was necessary to attain salvation; he called directly upon the person of the crucified Christ, from whom a single drop of shed blood possessed power enough to moisten a soul dried with sin. Donne’s work in “Crucifying” points to Christ as the substance of salvation; in “Resurrection,” with the completion of the work, no transubstantiated physical substance need substitute for him.

In the last stage of his meditative journey, the soul figuratively ascends with the triumphant Christ and joins other souls in celebration of this day.

Salute the last, and everlasting day,

Joy at the uprising of this Sunne, and Sonne,

Yee whose teares, or tribulation

Have purely washt, or burnt your drossie clay. (“Ascension,” 1-2).

Christ has become the uprising Sun, the light of the world; and, simultaneously, he has become the uprising Son, the ascended Christ. In this triumphant moment, souls accompanying Christ lose all sorrow in rejoicing, but not without first recalling former weeping and struggle. Tears in these lines emphasize the strong tenor of worship rendered Christ. The tears mentioned are not tears shed by a casual worshiper indulging in devotional display or unfounded emotion; they are shed by those whose devotion has led them spiritually in the journey with Christ from heaven to earth to the cross and back to heaven. In this sense, the potential structural circuit of both the sonnet sequence and the rosary sequence is best realized and most satisfying, for it facilitates Christ's descent from heaven to earth and ascension from earth to heaven, and the soul's ascension from earth to heaven with Christ.

The speaker's meditation on Christ has led him along this path and taken him to the Cross. Having followed Christ the "strong Ramme, which hast batter'd heaven for mee" (9), Christ the "Mild lambe, which thy blood, hast mark'd the path" (10), and Christ the "Bright torch, which shin'st, that I the way may see" (11), the soul enters a final plea to Christ: "Oh, with thy owne blood quench thy owne just wrath" ("Ascension," 12). The same blood that, with one drop, spiritually moistens his dry soul, must also quench the wrath of a just God.

Donne concludes "Ascension" in a manner that at once begins "Corona," drawing the soul immediately back to its first considerations of an offering of worship. The soul ends at the same location at which he began, depending upon the Holy Spirit in his meditation. "And if thy holy Spirit, my Muse did raise, / *Deigne at my hands this*

crown of prayer and praise (“Ascension,” 12-14). And thus guided by the cyclic structure, he returns to the meditation of “Corona” and continues rendering ceaseless worship to Christ.

6. BEHOLD THE HIGHEST: THE DISCOVERY

La Corona's cycle offered the precise structure Donne needed to imitate the Incarnation: Christ's descent to earth, assumption of human form, and ascent to heaven – one of most profound Christian paradoxes he explored often in his writings. In the structure, Donne finds the ideal means for developing not only a central structural metaphor, but also for attending to a matter of paradox naturally so attractive, yet so mysterious to him. No other act could match the sacrifice of Christ's Incarnation, as Donne explains in Holy Sonnet XV: “And as a robb'd man, which by search doth finde / His stolne stufte sold, must lose or buy't againe: / The Sonne of glory came downe, and was slaine” (9-11). Such a sacrifice, Donne continues, can only display the depth of the love of God for mankind in greater clarity: “'Twas much, that man was made like God before, / But, that God should be made like man, much more” (13-4). *La Corona*, in its journey through the Incarnation, is a discovery of the miracle of Christ; but it is ultimately much more: It is the worship of the Christ whose beauty and sacrifice save and transform the soul, the one who will “bring man to heaven, and heaven againe to man” (“To Mr Tilman,” 48). Further still, it is a construction of worship at a time when

worship occupied center stage in a deep religious controversy that extended, for all practical purposes at the time, worldwide, fracturing Christendom irreparably.

Donne's use of the rosary as a means of worship was a daring move for Protestant circles, and the boldness with which he used it even riskier. Yet, in his deliberate use of a controversial religious object, he offered his audience a reassuring alternative to the troubling controversies surrounding them, providing them a Christ-centered example to follow. In acknowledging the problem, he offered a solution to the problem: a model of worship identified entirely with Christ.

In this identification with Christ, Donne discovers the nature of worship, the soul's ongoing, outpouring response to the works of God. More precisely, he describes worship that cannot take place without knowing Christ intimately, as he describes in a complementary passage from his "Christ the Light" sermon, preached at St. Paul's:

If with that little candle thou canst creep humbly into low and poore places, if thou canst finde thy Saviour in a *Manger*, and in his *swathing clouts*, in his humiliation, and blesse God for that beginning, if thou canst finde him flying into Egypt, and finde in thy selfe a disposition to accompany him in a persecution, in a banishment, [. . .] Thou shalt see, that thou by thy small light hath gathered *Pearle* and *Amber*, and they by their great lights nothing but shels and pebles. (13-4)

In this sermon, Donne discusses the birth of "a new faculty of reason" in a regenerated believer. This knowledge, which he distinguishes from intellectual assent, is an illumination through which the believer may know God in a different manner from that

of the natural man. "But now in Christ Jesus," St. Paul affirms in his epistle to the Ephesians, "ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13). The worshiper worships Christ, the knowable God, by simply knowing Him; and, through knowing the shed blood of Christ, is brought near to Christ. And, for Donne's worshiper, this knowledge of Christ develops through worship – adoration so profound and so intimate that the worshiper's soul figuratively joins in the journey of Christ.

In his literary corona, Donne finds an altogether sacred means of confronting his soul with the person of Christ. For him, *La Corona* becomes an expression of personalized worship and love for Christ, a response-provoking guide to intimate communion with Christ. "O Jesu, the beginning and ende, the way, life," prays the devotee in *A Breefe Directory*,

haue minde, that from the top of thy head, unto the soales of thy feete
thou sufferedst for vs, to be drowned in water of thy paynefull passion:
for mind of this great pain, and namely for the depenes and widenens of
thy wounds, I beseech thee, blessed Jesu, teache me thy large precept a
commaundement of loue, which am all drowned in soule sinne. Amen.
(n. pag.)

La Corona, Donne's literary rosary, beautifies the miraculous incarnation of Christ, allowing the worshiper of Christ to be "drowned in the water of thy paynefull passion" through constant meditation upon the "depenens and widenens of thy wounds" – wounds whose efficacy leads to celestial victory. With such powerful meditations before him,

the controversies of his day are eclipsed; and he discovers in direct worship of the Son of God the deliverance his soul most needs. He confronts both the Roman Catholic practice of Mariolatry and the severity of the Protestant response, embracing a worshipful expression of prayer and praise directed only to Christ. In *La Corona*, Donne recaptures the profound utility of a symbolic structure capable of leading the worshiper in ceaseless prayer and praise, offering believers a devotional aid for purposes that lead in an intimate spiritual journey with Christ.

Through this effort, Donne offers *biblia pauperum*, scripture for the common man: Christ himself, the Word incarnated as flesh that, as St. John proclaims, “dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In *La Corona*, the believer encounters the knowable Christ. And to know Christ was, for Donne, the cure for both heresy and contention. To know Christ, for St. Paul, was more desirable than life itself, worth the loss of all things. To know Christ – in life, in death, and in resurrection – was the life of the believer, as St. Paul declares in Philippians 3:10: “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.”

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