

The controversy about the adoration of the Cross at the Carolingian court: Einhard's *Quaestio de adoranda cruce*.

Introduction.

This paper offers some reflections on the *Quaestio de adoranda cruce*, a small theological treatise that Einhard wrote in a letter dedicated to his friend, the monk Lupus de Fèrrieres. It is a source from the Carolingian period that can be framed within a much broader historical issue, the development of theological thought and ideas about the worship of sacred objects in the context of the project of renewal of the Frankish *Ecclesia* during the ninth century.

The *Quaestio de adoranda cruce*, written around 836, expresses a clear attitude to the problem of the veneration of sacred objects and especially to the validity of worshipping the cross. At the same time, the text synthesised various ideas and debates about Christian orthodoxy, its symbols and practices, all part of a larger project: the ordering and *renovation* of the *Ecclesia* and the Frankish kingdom. Although perhaps indirectly and at a more intimate level, the text, which is analysed here, shows latent concerns of the time, for example, the definition of sacred spaces and objects. The ultimate aim of this lecture is to analyse how the argumentation is constructed in the document and what were the main theological and doctrinal references used by Einhard to justify and explain the worship of the cross.

It is noteworthy that this charter has been little studied and the studies that deal with it are scarce. However, I consider its date of writing (836) to be of interest in the context of the reforms that were implemented during the period of Louis the Pious (r. 814-840) and it is a text that is indirectly linked to other writings of the period that express the interest and concern to establish Western Christian orthodoxy. In particular, with regard to the symbols and correct practices of the religion. In the case of this document, the focus is on the validity of worshipping the Cross of Christ.

Celia Chazelle's study *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era* addressed the manifestations and beliefs in written documents and artistic representations between the eighth and ninth centuries surrounding the problem of the passion and crucifixion as part of the theological reflection of various thinkers and authorities of the time. The study is relevant

in that it questions how they interpreted the essential doctrines of their faith, the basis of their beliefs, particularly on the question of eternal salvation as a question, which, at least in theory, guided every aspect of the daily life¹ of these men. In that sense, prayer and communication with the divinity were aspects of vital importance for the men of God, and to that extent, the *Quaestio* proposed an important reflection on this. Historian Eleanor Shipley, in her book *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*, explained Einhard's special interest in addressing men's attitudes towards sacred objects, as well as in identifying the correct forms of such practices.²

2. *Ecclesia* and Christology around the *Quaestio de adoranda cruce*.

First of all, mention must be made of the Carolingian project of ordering and reform, particularly with regard to the Frankish clergy. During the reign of Louis the Pious, the writing of an exclusive normative *corpus* for the Church increased, as the new emperor assumed the role of protector of the integrity and unity of the *Ecclesia* of the Frankish people.

Historian Matthew Innes explains that, while reform may mean adjustment in a positive sense, contemporaries spoke rather of *correctio* and *renovatio* as principles that implied a return to what were seen as eternal norms of proper Christian practice, and that this was embodied in the production and writing of religious texts and in the practice of liturgy and ritual.³ The *QAC* was written precisely out of such concerns.

Between 830 and 833, both in the circle close to the Carolingian court and outside, it was thought that the royal family was moving away from Christian precepts and that a return to order was necessary to achieve peace and stability in the kingdom. It was in this atmosphere of uncertainty that the emperor's penance at Soissons in the autumn of 833 led to the temporary deposition of Louis the Pious.

The clerics' warnings of royal power increased during these years. One of the best known examples was Jonas of Orleans, who took part in the synod of Paris in 829, where the distinction between temporal and spiritual power was discussed. From this meeting, in which Jonas participated as a notary, he was able to take up the main resolutions of the debate in order to write the *De institutione regia*. This work is part of a larger body of works that came

¹ Chazelle, *The Crucified God*, 3-10.

² Shipley Duckett, "Einhard of Seligenstadt", 86-88.

³ Innes, *An Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 456-464.

out between the second and third decade of the 9th century, a fundamental stage in the project of Carolingian renewal.

The correspondence between Einhard and Lupus and the poem by Rabano Mauro, *In honorem sanctae crucis*, who was the abbot of the monastery of Fulda, one of the most important centres of the time, are set in this context of intense activity and writing. Rabano Mauro asserted that only in the scriptures was the true way to salvation, in response to the position of the monk Hiatto, who asserted the superiority of pictorial representation over other expressions.⁴

This set of texts shows, according to Celia Chazelle, a generational transition that took place at the Carolingian court and a new stage in theological development around the Christological debate on the passion and the adoration of the cross.⁵ From the end of the 9th century, there was a growing interest in the corporeality of Christ, in explaining the mortality of man. In this context, plastic expressions emerged between the second quarter and the middle of the 9th century, depicting a dying Christ on the cross, with his body submerged and his eyes half-closed. He was shown without signs of physical suffering in order to emphasise his divine qualities: his eternal kingdom, his immortality and omnipotent triumph over evil and death.

In this framework, the imperial ideal was very close to the model of an "original" Christianity, which referred to an ancient tradition. A golden age of the ancient fathers to which one had to return in order to find the wisdom that would allow the correct practice of the liturgy, which referred to the primitive Roman ritual.⁶ In the case at hand, the importance of the cross in the history of Christianity was expressed as the ultimate symbol of the sacrifice of the Son of God on behalf of humanity. Christ died and conquered evil on the cross, and this fact confirms its redemptive value.

In this regard, the *QAC* introduces a fundamental question: is it possible to approach Christ on the cross to invoke God the Father? The answer inevitably leads to the Trinitarian dogma, and to the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son who are one with the Holy Spirit. Einhard says that:

⁴ Riché, *Daily life in the world of Charlemagne*, 233-234.

⁵ Chazelle, *op. cit.*, 123.

⁶ Cf. de Jong, *op. cit.*, p. 141. Moreover, in the face of the juridical plurality of the different kingdoms and their local laws, Christianity was the element that united all the baptised with any vassal of the Christian emperor. Hence, Christian law was the one, true and universal law. Brown, "Ch. 16. "Ruling the Christian People": Charlemagne" in *El primer milenio de la cristiandad*. Barcelona: Crítica, 1997, 240-241.

our faith firmly maintains that just as the nature and essence of the Father and the Son are one and the same, so the power of both is one and the same, and the prayer which one of them gave and taught us is heard by both of them at the same time, since both of them unanimously willed that it should be given and taught to us.⁷

Therefore, it was as valid to pray to God the Father as it was to pray to Jesus Christ, who shared the same divine nature. Praying to God the Son was not a lesser way of communicating with the Father, but a further means of approaching Him. In fact, this suggests that, perhaps indirectly, Einhard took a clear stand against adoptionism and any heretical movement that denied the divinity of Jesus and thus transgressed Christian orthodoxy.⁸

As part of his conclusion, Einhard was forceful in affirming that the adoration of the holy cross was not to be disdained. On the contrary, being in its presence, it should be revered and prostrated before it as if the Lord were present. With the emphasis on the sensory character, he recommended opening the spirit through the gaze, and adoring the One who is suspended on the cross. As Christ, the Son of God, through whom all things are possible, by going to the cross, which is undoubtedly holy, one obtained the favour that men needed in times of trouble and weakness.

The *QAC* introduces another important discussion to establish the correctness of devotional practices associated with the cross and prayer. In the next section, we address the distinction between two terms that are commonly treated in the same way, but which, according to Einhard, entail important differences and meanings; I am referring to worship and veneration.

3. Before the angels I sing to you and before your holy temple I kneel [Ps. 138 (137)]. Prayer and adoration as vehicles of communication with God.

Celia Chazelle mentions that the effort to define and distinguish these practices corresponds to a "relative openness" of some Frankish ecclesiastics to the veneration of the various representations that emerged at the time, for example, in illuminated manuscripts and marble effigies. This reflects the need to establish what was understood to be correct forms

⁷ Einhard, *Quaestio...*, 172.

⁸ At the end of the 9th century, the adoptionist conflict was at its height, especially the discussion between the bishops Felix of Urgel and the ideas of Beatus of Liébana. On the Adoptionist conflict and its link with the Carolingian dynasty, *see* González García, "La proyección europea del reino de Asturias: política, cultura y economía (718- 910)", 235-243; Orlandis, "La circunstancia histórica del adopcionismo español", 1079-1091.

of communication and reverence for God, and to demonstrate that not all behaviour towards images led to idolatry.⁹

By presenting problems such as the consubstantiality between the Father and the Son, reaffirming the divine power of Christ, Einhard, like other scholars of the time, established the effectiveness of worshipping the cross as if the faithful were approaching the worship of God the Father. Unravelling the conclusions of this problem is complex, but the text tries to explain it simply.

In entering fully into the problematic, Einhard has to make a first distinction between prayer and worship. On the former, he points out that: "to pray is, in my opinion, to beseech the invisible God, or if there is any other power in which it may or is expedient to place the hope of salvation, with the mind or the voice, or jointly with the mind and the voice and without any gesture of the body".

Whereas worship is:

To show veneration to a visible thing, placed before oneself and present, by bowing the head, by reverence or prostration of the whole body, by stretching out the arms and opening the hands, or in any other way that implies or constitutes a gesture of the body. We venerate, in fact, many things to which we cannot and should not pray. This veneration, in the Holy Scriptures, is often called worship.¹⁰

The above quotations raise a number of issues that are worth reflecting on in order to understand how communication with the divine is understood. Firstly, prayer is an act that requires spiritual and mental preparation, unlike worship, which also involves corporeality. This definition appears in a general way, but in the following lines, it will become more complex.

Einhard drew on *Scripture* and the words of the apostle James and St Paul in his *letter to the Romans* to explain the role of prayer in communicating with God and what hinders this connection. Although prayer is the ideal means of expressing a specific need, if people did not receive divine help, it was because they prayed incorrectly: "They ask and do not receive, because they ask wrongly" (*Jac. 4:3*)¹¹.

⁹ Chazelle, op. cit., 124.

¹⁰ Einhard, *Quaestio...*

¹¹ Ibid.

Therefore, they could not obtain a favourable answer from God, for as St. Paul says: "We do not know how to ask in the right way" (*Rom.* 8:26). The question was not in the faithful, nor in their prayer, "for he who does not know what or how to ask may ask wrongly and therefore not get what he asks for".¹² According to Einhard, this happened because the teachings that God left to his people were forgotten; hence the need to return to the sacred text, especially the *Gospels*:

For in the whole series of the *Gospels* there is never any mention that Our Lord Jesus Christ had taught or commanded prayer to Himself, indeed, when He speaks on many occasions of the prayer we should make to the Father, He advises us that we should pray to the Father, that we should ask the Father, that we should beseech the Father and that we should turn to the Father in every need.¹³

Thus, the text establishes some basic parameters for the prayer to have a favourable effect: first, that it should be made in front of a sacred place, preferably in front of the altar, for only in this way could one be certain of the presence of the Father and the Son on the cross. Only in this way could the petitions of men be answered.

However, we must remember that not all the faithful could have access to these sacred spaces, so it is intuited that the community to which Einhard's text is addressed was exclusively of clerics. On the other hand, he alludes to prayer as a communal act and takes the example of an assembly where the men - officials of the Empire - met in council and, before beginning, said a prayer to ask for the preservation of the church.

What is most striking is Einhard's reminder that the ritual of prayer should also be public and bring the community together. In his letter, this hint of the political utility of prayer appears, but, above all, that the public manifestation of this communication with God also fulfilled a vital function in the Kingdom: preserving unity and concord among the community, two fundamental principles in the Carolingian project.

Such expressions recall the efforts that were made during the time of Charlemagne to reform the Christian liturgy, mainly in the rite of mass and chant, and which put the correct forms of practice first in order to guarantee the desired effects. On the importance of public

¹² *Idem.*

¹³ *Idem.*

prayer, in the text, there is a warning that contrasts the dangers of private prayer, as it was easy to fall into error and not achieve a rapprochement with God.

On the other hand, the source also makes a fundamental distinction between *worship* and *veneration*. Although both terms are commonly confused and used interchangeably, for Einhard it seems essential to avoid confusion and to be clear about what each implies. As for veneration, it can be addressed to someone because of his or her honour or quality:

[...] the term adoration is very often used instead of veneration. We see that veneration is frequently and properly professed not only to living and sentient beings, such as angels or men, but also to insentient and lifeless things, such as temples, the tombs of saints or their relics.¹⁴

Thus, another issue raised by the *Quaestio* was the possibility of veneration of other kinds of sacred representations. For example, the recourse to the apostles, saints and martyrs in prayer showed that in their spirit there was a divine presence, and thus in their living body there was an agent capable of interceding for them, who in their prayers came to their aid. Einhard also speaks of the veneration of angels, of people's feelings towards other sacred elements such as tombs and their relics. Although these were lifeless and corruptible bodies, their veneration is understandable at a time when the cult of the dead and its commemoration developed more strongly, especially because of their miraculous capacity. The text acknowledges that such veneration was quite common, although it should be clear that representation does not imply that God himself is to be found in the materiality of such objects.

On the other hand, as far as worship is concerned, it is addressed only to God and the means of invoking Him is prayer. In his treatise, he insists on the fact that God is present everywhere, and that worship was of a higher character, being addressed only to the Father. Through prayer, worship was in accordance with the *Scriptures* and required a profound preparation of the spirit rather than an exaggerated gesture of the body. In the text there is a reference to the *Gospel of John*, when Jesus addressed a Samaritan woman as follows:

You, Samaritans, worship what you do not know, while we Jews know what we worship: for salvation comes from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and we are already in it, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. It is those worshippers whom the

¹⁴ Einhard, *Quaestio*...

Father seeks. God is Spirit; therefore, those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and truth. (*Ioh.* 4, 22-24)

In this sense, communication with the divine and the sacred was established in accordance with the teachings of the *Holy Scriptures*. In this differentiation between veneration and worship, a priority aspect was to elucidate between the human (material) and corruptible, as opposed to the sacred, since this character or power was granted by the divinity and endowed it with this superior dignity; therefore, worship was exclusive to God. While other objects could be worshipped, although their quality was different and should not be confused or manifested by exaggerated gestures.

Einhard points out that the preparation, which involves coming into contact with God through worship before the cross, requires a greater effort of the spirit than of the body. The text poses a double exercise that also involves gestures: first there is a moment of inner preparation, which is then translated outwardly, with a bodily matter: "when you prostrate yourself on the ground to worship, you will be at the same time praying in your mind and worshipping with a movement of your body God, who is everywhere, as if he were present and set before you".

In order to obtain effective communication with God and to invoke his help, the preparation of the faithful must be holistic, involving both body and soul. He puts it this way:

I think it is already clear that the adoration of the Holy Cross should not be rejected, indeed, as St. Jerome says, recalling St. Paula's arrival in Jerusalem: "prostrate before the Cross, she adored it as if she saw the Lord still hanging on it", we believe that this too should be done, that is, prostrate before the Cross and adore Him who is hanging on it, contemplating Him with the eyes of the soul.¹⁵

Thus, the text ends this second part with the assurance that God could be worshipped through prayer, and that correct devotion guaranteed the presence of the divinity among those who went to the cross. In constructing the argument, the author is aware that there is much more to the problem, but that he limits himself to the above in order to avoid "new knots" that would involve entering into other problems and falling into theological errors, as he himself warns.

¹⁵ Einhard, *Quaestio...*

4. Conclusions.

This mature text of Einhard's seems even richer in the articulation of its content. Not only does it show us a very intimate relationship with its recipient, but it is also a text that records his position on theological problems fundamental to the shaping of Christian orthodoxy in the Frankish world of the early Middle Ages.

In the case of the veneration of the cross of Christ, we cannot but consider it as the ultimate symbol for the consolidation and expansion of the Christian religion since Late Antiquity. Einhard's text brings us closer to a world in which the theological discussion on the worship of the cross is already showing signs of complexity. It is interesting to note that, despite being a text little studied by specialists in the Carolingian world, the *Quaestio de adoranda cruce* raises reflections that enrich our vision of Christian thought; and that, for a text written in the first half of the ninth century, it is as rich in its content as in the ideas it raises.