

Catholics worship statues!" People still make this ridiculous claim. Because Catholics have statues in their churches, goes the accusation, they are violating God's commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: you shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Ex. 20:4–5); "Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold" (Ex. 32:31).

It is right to warn people against the sin of idolatry when they are committing it. But calling Catholics idolaters because they have images of Christ and the saints is based on misunderstanding or ignorance of what the Bible says about the purpose and uses (both good and bad) of statues.

Anti-Catholic writer Loraine Boettner, in his book *Roman Catholicism*, makes the blanket statement, "God has forbidden the use of images in worship" (281). Yet if people were to "search the scriptures" (cf. John 5:39), they would find the opposite is true. God forbade the *worship* of statues, but he did not forbid the *religious use* of statues. Instead, he actually *commanded* their use in religious contexts!

GOD SAID TO MAKE THEM

People who oppose religious statuary forget about the many passages where the Lord *commands* the making of statues. For example: "And you shall make two cherubim of gold [i.e., two gold statues of angels]; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end; of one piece of the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be" (Ex. 25:18–20).

David gave Solomon the plan "for the altar of incense made of refined gold, and its weight; also his plan for the golden chariot of the cherubim

that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord. All this he made clear by the writing of the hand of the Lord concerning it all, all the work to be done according to the plan" (1 Chr. 28:18–19). David's plan for the temple, which the biblical author tells us was "by the writing of the hand of the Lord concerning it all," included statues of angels.

Similarly Ezekiel 41:17–18 describes graven (carved) images in the idealized temple he was shown in a vision, for he writes, "On the walls round about in the inner room and [on] the nave were carved likenesses of cherubim."

THE RELIGIOUS USES OF IMAGES

During a plague of serpents sent to punish the Israelites during the exodus, God told Moses to "make [a statue of] a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live" (Num. 21:8–9).

One had to *look* at the bronze statue of the serpent to be healed, which shows that statues could be used ritually, not merely as religious decorations.

Catholics use statues, paintings, and other artistic devices to recall the person or thing depicted. Just as it helps to remember one's mother by looking at her photograph, so it helps to recall the example of the saints by looking at pictures of them. Catholics also use statues as teaching tools. In the early Church they were especially useful for the instruction of the illiterate. Many Protestants have pictures of Jesus and other Bible pictures in Sunday school for teaching children. Catholics also use statues to commemorate certain people and events, much as Protestant churches have three-dimensional nativity scenes at Christmas.

If one measured Protestants by the same rule, then by using these "graven" images, they would be practicing the "idolatry" of which they accuse Catholics. But there's no idolatry going on in these situations. God forbids the *worship* of images as gods,

but he doesn't ban the making of images. If he had, religious movies, videos, photographs, paintings, and all similar things would be banned. But, as the case of the bronze serpent shows, God does not even forbid the ritual use of religious images.

It is when people begin to adore a statue as a god that the Lord becomes angry. Thus when people *did* start to worship the bronze serpent as a snake-god (whom they named "Nehushtan"), the righteous king Hezekiah had it destroyed (2 Kgs. 18:4).

WHAT ABOUT BOWING?

Sometimes anti-Catholics cite Deuteronomy 5:9, where God said concerning idols, "You shall not bow down to them." Since many Catholics sometimes bow or kneel in front of statues of Jesus and the saints, anti-Catholics confuse the legitimate veneration of a sacred image with the sin of idolatry.

Though bowing can be used as a posture in worship, not all bowing is worship. In Japan, people show respect by bowing in greeting (the equivalent of the Western handshake). Similarly, a person can kneel before a king without worshipping him as a god. In the same way, a Catholic who may kneel in front of a statue while praying isn't worshipping the statue or even praying to *it*, any more than the Protestant who kneels with a Bible in his hands when praying is worshipping the Bible or praying to *it*.

HIDING THE SECOND COMMANDMENT?

Another charge sometimes made by Protestants is that the Catholic Church "hides" the second commandment. This is because in Catholic catechisms, the first commandment is often listed as "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3), and the second is listed as "You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain." (Ex. 20:7). From this, it is argued that Catholics have deleted the prohibition of idolatry to justify their use of religious statues. But this is false. Catholics simply group the commandments

differently from most Protestants.

In Exodus 20:2–17, which gives the Ten Commandments, there are actually fourteen imperative statements. To arrive at Ten Commandments, some statements have to be grouped together, and there is more than one way of doing this. Since, in the ancient world, polytheism and idolatry were always united—idolatry being the outward expression of polytheism—the historic Jewish numbering of the Ten Commandments has always grouped together the imperatives "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3) and "You shall not make for yourself a graven image" (Ex. 20:4). The historic Catholic numbering follows the Jewish numbering on this point, as does the historic Lutheran numbering. Martin Luther recognized that the imperatives against polytheism and idolatry are two parts of a single command.

Jews and Christians abbreviate the commandments so that they can be remembered using a summary, ten-point formula. For example, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants typically summarize the Sabbath commandment as, "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy," though the commandment's actual text takes four verses (Ex. 20:8–11).

When the prohibition of polytheism/idolatry is summarized, Jews, Catholics, and Lutherans abbreviate it as "You shall have no other gods before me." This is no attempt to "hide" the idolatry prohibition (Jews and Lutherans don't even use statues of saints and angels). It is to make learning the Ten Commandments easier.

The Catholic Church is not dogmatic about how the Ten Commandments are to be numbered, however. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "The division and numbering of the Commandments have varied in the course of history. The present catechism follows the division of the Commandments established by Augustine, which has become traditional in the Catholic Church. It is also that of the Lutheran confession. The Greek Fathers worked out a slightly different division, which is found in the Orthodox Churches and Reformed communities" (CCC 2066).

THE FORM OF GOD?

Some anti-Catholics appeal to Deuteronomy 4:15–18 in their attack on religious statues: “[S]ince you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.”

We’ve already shown that God doesn’t prohibit the making of statues or images of various creatures for religious purposes (cf. 1 Kgs. 6:29–32, 8:6–66; 2 Chr. 3:7–14). But what about statues or images that represent God? Many Protestants would say that’s wrong because Deuteronomy 4 says the Israelites did not see God under any form when he made the covenant with them, therefore we should not make symbolic representations of God either. But does Deuteronomy 4 forbid such representations?

THE ANSWER IS NO

Early in its history, Israel was forbidden to make any depictions of God because he had not revealed himself in a visible form. Given the pagan culture surrounding them, the Israelites might have been tempted to worship God in the form of an animal or some natural object (e.g., a bull or the sun).

But later God *did* reveal himself under visible forms, such as in Daniel 7:9: “As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was Ancient of Days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire.” Protestants make depictions of the Father under this form when they do illustrations of Old Testament prophecies.

The Holy Spirit revealed himself under at least two visible forms—that of a dove, at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and as tongues of fire, on the day of Pentecost (Acts

2:1–4). Protestants use these images when drawing or painting these biblical episodes and when they wear Holy Spirit lapel pins or place dove emblems on their cars.

But, more important, in the Incarnation of Christ his Son, God showed mankind an icon of himself. Paul said, “He is the *image* (Greek: *ikōn*) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Christ is the tangible, divine “icon” of the unseen, infinite God.

We read that when the magi were “going into the house they *saw the child* with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matt. 2:11). Though God did not reveal a form for himself on Mount Horeb, he did reveal one in the house in Bethlehem.

The bottom line is, when God made the New Covenant with us, he *did* reveal himself under a visible form in Jesus Christ. For that reason, we *can* make representations of God in Christ. Even Protestants use all sorts of religious images: Pictures of Jesus and other biblical persons appear on a myriad of Bibles, picture books, T-shirts, jewelry, bumper stickers, greeting cards, compact discs, and manger scenes. Christ is even symbolically represented through the *Icthus* or “fish emblem.”

Common sense tells us that, since God has revealed himself in various images, most especially in the incarnate Jesus Christ, it’s not wrong for us to use images of these forms to deepen our knowledge and love of God. That’s *why* God revealed himself in these visible forms, and that’s why statues and pictures are made of them.

IDOLATRY CONDEMNED BY THE CHURCH

Since the days of the apostles, the Catholic Church has consistently condemned the sin of idolatry. The early Church Fathers warn against this sin, and Church councils also dealt with the issue.

The Second Council of Nicaea (787), which dealt largely with the question of the religious use of images and icons, said, “[T]he one who redeemed us

from the darkness of idolatrous insanity, Christ our God, when he took for his bride his holy Catholic Church . . . promised he would guard her and assured his holy disciples saying, ‘I am with you every day until the consummation of this age.’ . . . To this gracious offer some people paid no attention; being hoodwinked by the treacherous foe they abandoned the true line of reasoning . . . and they failed to distinguish the holy from the profane, asserting that the icons of our Lord and of his saints were no different from the wooden images of satanic idols.”

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566) taught that idolatry is committed “by worshipping idols and images as God, or believing that they possess any divinity or virtue entitling them to our worship, by praying to, or reposing confidence in them” (374).

“Idolatry is a perversion of man’s innate religious sense. An idolater is someone who ‘transfers his indestructible notion of God to anything other than God’” (CCC 2114).

The Church absolutely recognizes and condemns the sin of idolatry. What anti-Catholics fail to recognize is the distinction between thinking a piece of stone or plaster is a god and desiring to visually remember Christ and the saints in heaven by making statues in their honor. The making and use of religious statues is a *thoroughly* biblical practice. Anyone who says otherwise doesn’t know his Bible.

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

IMPRIMATUR: In accord with 1983 CIC 827 § 3,
permission to publish this work is hereby granted.
+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, 10 August 2004

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Mary & the Saints

DO CATHOLICS WORSHIP STATUES?

