

Veneration of Holy Images: Idolatry?

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in Heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ~ Colossians 1:15-17

THE STATUE OF LIBERTY is, in a sense, sacred to patriotic Americans. It was a gift to the United

States from France that was meant to convey to all who saw it a triumphant image of a nation that embodied the highest ideas of nationhood and human goodness. For us in the United States, it is a symbol, or icon, of our love for our country. It speaks to us of freedom, and symbolizes a light to guide troubled souls to a welcoming homeland. This statue is loved and cherished by millions; it is beloved by all who know what it means, the virtues for which it stands. And woe to anyone who would desecrate it! But with all this respect, admiration, love, and veneration, we do not worship or adore it. It is not the object of American idolatry, for we treasure and love not the statue, but what it represents.

It is the same with images — statues, paintings, mosaics, stained-glass windows — that adorn our Catholic churches and find their way into many Catholic homes. The pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the statues of our Blessed Mother and other saints, the crucifixes, the Stations of the Cross — these are but symbols, or images, that speak to us of God and holy persons. They are ways to show respect or to remind ourselves of precious indications of love and sacrifice for our sakes. We show all these blessed reminders great respect, but no matter how intense may be the demonstration of affection, there is never adoration, never worship. The Catholic Church teaches adoration of God, and God alone. Even Mary, the Mother of God, may inspire extravagant displays of devotion, but she was human and finite, and is never to be adored.

Many people have great difficulty squaring the veneration of holy images with God's commandment in the Old Testament not to make any images at all: *"You shall not make for yourself a graven image,*

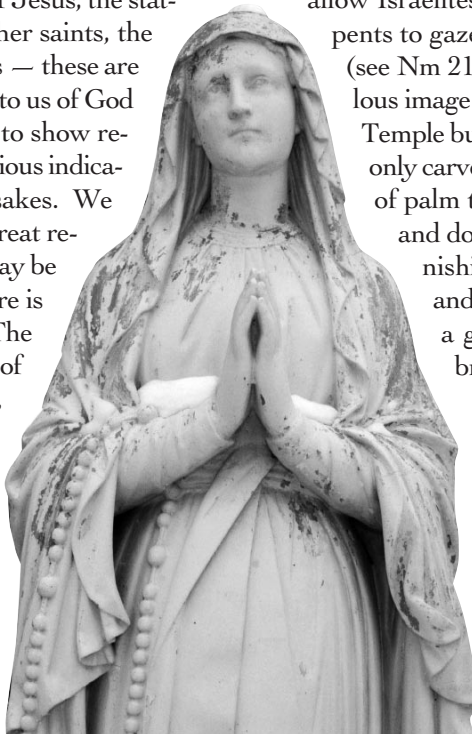
"God's prohibition of images was not absolute."

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). Idolatry was the usual practice when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, and forbidding the making of statues was part of God's plan to ensure that the Israelites worshipped him, and him alone, a plan that took many centuries to accomplish.

Yet God's prohibition of images was not absolute. He commanded that figures of cherubim (the same kind of angels that guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden; see Gn 3:24) be placed on either side of the Ark of the Covenant (see Ex 25:18-22). He commanded that images of the cherubim also be worked into the curtains that made up the tabernacle holding the Ark of the Covenant (see Ex 26:1) and into the veil that concealed the Ark (see Ex 26:31-33). He commanded that Moses make a serpent of brass, mount it on a staff, and allow Israelites who had been bitten by fiery serpents to gaze on it so that they might be healed (see Nm 21:6-9), the first example of a miraculous image in salvation history. He blessed the Temple built by Solomon, which contained not only carved cherubim but also representations of palm trees and open flowers on the walls and doors (see 1 Kgs 6:29-35), bronze furnishings with depictions of lions, oxen, and cherubim (see 1 Kgs 7:27-29), and a great bronze basin held by twelve bronze oxen (1 Kgs 7:44-45).

What remained absolute until the coming of Jesus was any kind of depiction of the unseen God. With Jesus, we actually see the face of God in human form, as Jesus himself tells the apostles: *"He who has seen me has seen the Father"* (Jn 14:9). This changed everything, as St. Paul says: *"For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to*



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give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). From the earliest days of Christianity in the catacombs of Rome, we find depictions of Jesus, his Mother, angels and saints, and scenes from salvation history on sarcophagi (stone caskets) and in paintings.

Yet there were those who believed that the Old Testament proscription of images was still in full force. Pope St. Gregory the Great wrote in the late 500s this explanation of the value of images and the reason they should not be destroyed: “Not without reason has antiquity allowed the stories of saints to be painted in holy places. And we indeed entirely praise thee for not allowing them to be adored, but we blame thee for breaking them. For it is one thing to adore an image, it is quite another thing to learn from the appearance of a picture what we must adore. What books are to those who can read, that is a picture to the ignorant who look at it; in a picture even the unlearned may see what example they should follow; in a picture they who know no letters may yet read. Hence, for barbarians especially a picture takes the place of a book” (Epistle IX, 105).

The most significant expressions of the disbelief in images in the first millennium of the Church’s history were several iconoclastic (meaning “image-breaking”) persecutions in the 700s and 800s in the Byzantine Empire, all that remained of the old Roman Empire. The Second Council of Nicaea, convened in 787 to pronounce clearly the Church’s teaching on images in the face of their widespread destruction, stated that images confirm “that the incarnation of the Word of God was real and not imaginary”¹ (CCC 1160), and pronounced: “[W]e rightly define with full certainty and correctness that, like the figure of the precious and life-giving cross, venerable and holy images of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, our inviolate Lady, the holy Mother of God, and the venerated angels, all the saints and the just, whether painted or made of mosaic or another suitable material, are to be exhibited in the holy church-

“The Church uses physical images to convey spiritual realities to the soul.”



Cathedral of Notre Dame (Our Lady) in Paris, France, built between 1165 and 1255

es of God, on sacred vessels and vestments, walls and panels, in houses and on streets”² (CCC 1161). The Council went on to say that those who look at images are reminded of, and love more ardently, those depicted, and that true adoration is to be given to God alone. With the coming of Protestantism, iconoclasm flowered again. There was a great destruction of images in Catholic churches all over Europe, and to this day many Protestant churches are unadorned with images, or use them sparsely.

Material things have an impact on the intellect and will. They lead our thoughts to spiritual things and lead our will to prayer, following the commandments, and living a life of

love. The Church, realizing that our bodies, through our senses, affect our souls, uses physical images to convey spiritual realities to the soul. And the soul, in turn, has an impact on the body, so that what we feel strongly about, we often express outwardly in our emotions, such as joy, sorrow, and repentance. When we love someone, it is natural for us to want to have and treasure images of the beloved. The pictures, statues, and other replicas or representations of God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints are only means to help raise our minds and hearts to a God whom we do not see and to saints who have gone before us into glory. Images of Jesus remind us that, as he came in the “likeness of men” (Phil 2:7), we are “predestined to be conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Rom 8:29).

Images of God, angels, and saints are integral parts of Catholic religious practice that promote fuller union with God, but they are not substitutes for the real things. Catholic practice and respect for images of any kind have their place, but they only represent reality. The Catholic Church does not, and never has, approved of or encouraged idolatry. The Church’s icons and other instruments of memory are means by which our minds are turned toward those we love. That is their purpose, their only purpose.

(CCC 476-477, 1159-1162, 2129-2132)

¹ Council of Nicaea II (787) from Conciliorum Oecumenicorum decreta 111

² Council of Nicaea II from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum 600 (1965)