

CATHOLIC

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Why Do Catholics Worship Statues?



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Some years ago I was visiting a Catholic Church with a non-Catholic Christian. When he saw a statue of an angel he pointed at it, shook his head sadly and said, "It breaks the second commandment."

In the Protestant version, the second commandment is, "You shall not make any graven image." Therefore I could understand my friend's objection to the carved image of the angel.

However, I wanted to challenge him. My friend was a Bible only Christian, but according to the Bible, the prohibition of graven images could not have been absolute because God himself commanded Moses to produce carved images for use in worship. The famous Ark of the Covenant is one example. God told Moses, "And you shall make two cherubim of gold of hammered work shall you make them...The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings..." (Ex. 25:18-20).

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.

Also, when Solomon built the great temple in Jerusalem he was instructed to build a font to wash the sacrificial animals and the font was on the back of four carved images of bulls. (I Kings 7:23-25)

The images in the tabernacle of Moses were not only carved. Great tapestries with angels embroidered in them made up the walls of the tent like worship space. (Ex.36:35-38)

God's prohibition was not simply a law against carved images, but against pagan idols, and Catholics agree that idolatry is forbidden. It is worth going through a museum or history book to see what the idols of pagan religions look like. They are the images of demons. Often they are half beast and half man. Other times they are monstrous, bloodthirsty figures of nightmares.

They are not only the images from the inhabitants of hell, but pagans believed the idols could become the channels for the demons to come into the world, and that the images could become infested with the demons. No wonder God prohibited such horrible practices!

The carvings in a Catholic church, however, are completely different. They are artistic representations of real people--not demons. They are portrayals of Jesus, Mary and Joseph or various other saints.

The statues are family portraits if you like--images of our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are reminders of the fact that Jesus touched and transformed their lives with his amazing grace. Furthermore, many Protestant Christians have

nativity sets in their homes at Christmas with carved figures of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but no one would accuse them of idolatry!

Nevertheless, the question of whether Christians may use images as part of their worship is one which has been

faced before. In the eighth and ninth centuries the Christians in Turkey decided that images were wrong. Icons were banned and all existing icons were destroyed. This caused a huge controversy in the

church which was called the "iconoclasm controversy."

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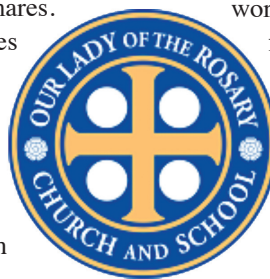
caused Christians to think about the question of images more deeply. They came to realize that images were banned in the Old Testament times not only because they represented demons, but also because God had not yet given them the perfect image of himself. That perfect image of God is his son Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Colossians Paul says that Jesus is the "image of the unseen God." (Col. 1:15) Jesus is God's icon. Because Jesus was the perfect image of God in human history. Icons, mosaics, paintings and carvings the pictured Jesus were therefore not idols, but portraits of Jesus Christ, God's Son our Savior.

Furthermore, if Jesus was the image of the unseen God, then who are we? We are created in God's image, and born again in the image of Jesus. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul says that we are, "God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:10) In other words, we are God's work of art. As Jesus is the image of the unseen God, we Christians are "little Christs". When we see images of the saints we are reminded of the beautiful truth that they are portraits of God's handiwork.

Some of these images, through centuries of prayer and devotions, are specially honored by Catholics. We do not pray to the image or worship it, but we thank God for the great work he has done in the life of that saint. In venerating the visual sign we worship the God who completed his work of grace empowering that person to become a shining image of God's glory: a person who has come into "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph.4:13)



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