

## Statues

by Jim Seghers

During a discussion about the Catholic faith with a group of non-Catholic men I asked the following question: "What is the one thing about the Catholic Church that you find most difficult to accept?" One of the men replied, "Statues!" To be quite honest I found his answer surprising. Subsequently, he explained that when he was a boy he belonged to a small Baptist congregation. The pastor of that Church frequently denounced the worship of statues criticizing the Catholic Church. Even though this man knew that Catholics do not worship statues, his early training made the Catholic practice of using statues offensive.

### The Accusation

In Exodus 20:4-5 the Bible explicitly commands: "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." You see! The Bible clearly forbids the making of any images. Yet Catholic churches are filled with such images. In addition, the Bible prohibits bowing down to images, yet Catholics frequently kneel before statues, crucifixes and other images.

### The Response

The Bible does not forbid image making **absolutely**. This becomes clear when this passage is interpreted in the context of other biblical passages. For example, the same Holy Spirit who inspired Moses to write Exodus 20:4-5 also inspired Moses to write Exodus 25:18-19 where God commands Moses to make statues of the cherubim (angels).

In Num 21:8 God also commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent (seraph), which the Israelites had to gaze upon in order to be healed. God used this image as his instrument. In Jn 3:14 we learn that this image was a type of Christ.

In 2 Kgs 18:4 (under Ezechias) God commanded the destruction of the bronze serpent, but only *after* it had come to be worshipped. Up to that point it has been preserved for about 800 years.

The Bible provided other examples of the use of images. Garlands of fruit, flowers and trees were carved (Num 8:4; 1 Kgs 6:18; 7:36). The king's throne rested on carved lions (2 Kgs 10:19-20). Images of lions and bulls supported the basins in the temple (1 Kgs 7: 25, 29).

In 1 Kgs 6: 23, 27a, 29, 30-31 we discover that within the sanctuary of the temple "he made two cherubims of olive tree, each ten cubits high... And he set the cherubims within the inner house... And he carved all the walls of the house round about with carved figures of cherubims and palm trees and open flowers, within and without... And for the entering of the oracle he made doors of olive tree. The two doors also were of olive tree; and he carved upon them carvings of cherubims made palm trees and open flowers." God did not condemn this practice, rather he was pleased (1 Kgs 9:3).

The Bible does forbid making or using images for the purpose of worshipping them: “you shall not **bow down** to them or **serve** them” (Ex 20:5). This commandment is absolute. God forbids the worship of any idol, including statues, power, sex, money, and oneself. However, when Catholics kneel before a crucifix or a statue, the posture is a sign of reverence to God not the image.

The Catholic Church forbids the worship of idols or anything created. This is called the sin of idolatry. Only God is to be worshipped. The Church’s clear teaching on this point found in the [\*Catechism of the Catholic Church \(CCC\)\*](#), which is cited below.

#### **CCC #2112**

The first commandment condemns *polytheism*. It requires man neither to believe in, nor to venerate, other divinities than the one true God. Scripture constantly recalls this rejection of “idols, [of] silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.” These empty idols make their worshippers empty: “Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them” [citing Ps 115:4-5, 8; cf. Isa 44:44:9-20; Jer 10:1-16; Dan 14:1-30; Bar 6; Wis 13:1-15:19]. God, however, is the “living God” [Josh 3:10; Ps 42:3; etc.] who gives life and intervenes in history.

#### **CCC #2113**

Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. **Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God.** Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a **creature** in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), **power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money**, etc. Jesus says, “you cannot serve God and mammon” [Mt 6:24]. Many martyrs died for not adoring “the Beast” [Rev 13-14] refusing even to simulate such worship. Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God [citing: Gal 5:20; Eph 5:5].

September 9, 1999