

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE USE OF IMAGES

By

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### **Introduction**

In ancient Near East in those days, the pagan neighbours of the Israelites depicted their gods in graven images, figures or figurines. They worship those images or idols as exact counterpart of their gods. For fear that Israel might be influenced by these people, Yahweh their God gave them strict warning never to imitate their neighbour's system of worship. Now among these warnings are the following: "Since you saw no form (of God) 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... Do not be drawn away to worship them and serve them" (Deuteronomy 4:15-25; Exodus 20:4-5). This warning is sounded primarily to dissuade the people from idolatry and not to forbid the making of carved objects, since one can make an image without worshipping it.

However, many people especially non-catholic Christians are not comfortable with the images and crucifix of Jesus Christ, the statues of Virgin Mary and the saints found in the Catholic Church. For them, keeping of any image amounts to idolatry, following the words of Exodus 20:4-5; and Deuteronomy 4:15-19. In the first place, there is no image of God the Father in the Catholic Church. For the fact that God also commanded Moses and the Israelites to make and keep images in worship places (Exod. 25:18-22; Numb 21:8-9) not only proves this point but also shows that critics of the

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Church do not understand the message of the scripture at this point. There are also other biblical passages which reported keeping of images for both religious and secular uses without fear of idolatry. All these indicate that not every use of images is idolatry. So, there are images or statues which are objects in worship but not objects of worship.

In actual sense of the word, what is image or statue? Did the bible prohibit making of images or the worship of it? In the bible, is there any place where God commanded or permitted images to be made or kept at places of worship? In the strict sense of the word, what is worship? Is an image the same thing with an idol? Did the bible report keeping of carved objects in the temple in Jerusalem? Is it possible for one to keep an image or statue without worshipping it? What is an idol? Why do Catholics have images in their churches? Do Catholics really worship these images? What is worship? The very task of this paper is to answer the above multi-barreled questions with biblical instances.

### **What is an Image? What is an Idol?**

The term image is from the Hebrew (צֶלֶם) *tselem*, translated image or likeness in English, or *tselem*, from *tseel* "a shadow, statue or figure" (Dan. 3:1; 1 Sam. 6:5). Image or statue is often used interchangeably with likeness but distinguishable from the "likeness". The Greek *eikoon*, meaning image or exact counterpart of a thing (Col. 1:15; Gen. 1:27), presupposes a prototype. "Likeness" (Greek *homoiosis*) implies similarity or mere resemblance. It is neither identical nor an exact counterpart. No wonder, the Son is never called the "likeness" of the Father but the "Image" which expresses sameness (1 Cor. 11:7; John 1:18; 14:9; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Tim. 3:16; 6:16; Heb. 1:3). The statue is supposed to be an "image" exactly representing some person or object. It is the form or the exact copy of something. According to Obinwa, "an image is a representation of a person or thing in the form of a statue or a picture made by a carver, a sculptor, an artist or a photographer".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Obinwa Ignatius, "The Use of Images in Christian Worship: A Biblical Perspective." in *Bigard Theological Studies*, vol. 40 no.1, 2020, p. 87.

A close study of Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 4:15-25 reveals that what stands forbidden is making or worshiping of idols not making of image. What the original language of the bible uses is the Hebrew (פֶּסֶל) *Pesel* (Ex 20:4; Deut. 4:23) which should be translated “idol” because it includes in its meaning the idea of worship and therefore idolatry. Those who translated *Pesel* as graven image caused the confusion for they were in fatal error.

An idol is an object kept specifically for worship. It is a symbol of a deity and most symbols contain within themselves the thing symbolized. Idol and image are not the same. An idol is considered to be an external manifestation of an indwelling spirit or deity. It is the object or figurine possessed by an invisible spirit or deity. Such object or image is believed to be inhabited by the deity. The term *pesel* means idol and therefore an object of worship. In fact, this Hebrew term *pesel* (used in Exodus 20:4) wrongly translated "graven image" had a technical sense that meant more than a statue or image, and included the idea of "idol". For this reason, the mere making of *pesel* is a sin because it has the idea of idolatry attached. Therefore, the translation of *pesel* as image is a grave blunder and misleading. This confuses many into believing that mere making of image is idolatry. When the sons of Israel made a molten calf in the wilderness, the declaration was: “behold your god (Yahweh), O! Israel who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod. 32:4). Thus, they affirmed that the image of a calf was their god. So, the proper translation of the Hebrew *Pesel* used by the sacred writer in Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 4:23 would have been “thou shalt not make an idol for yourself”.

### **What is Worship?**

Worship in the strict sense of the word is the supreme reverence or adoration that should be accorded to God alone. The Catholics call it *latria* which means the type of reverence or adoration reserved for God alone. We have different senses of reverence or veneration. The highest level is called *Latria* and it is given only to the Supreme Being. The second level of reverence is called *Hyper-dulia* which is the respect given to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ because of her unique relationship with God and her privileged position in the economy of salvation. The third grade is *Dulia* from the Greek *doulos* meaning servant. This is the reverence or veneration given to the saints or holy servants of God. We give honour to whom it is due, but to each according to his or her level.

To render to any creature, the adoration or reverence due only for the Supreme Creator is idolatry and abominable. The bible and the Church condemn it.

### **God Clearly Commanded the Making of Images in the Bible**

The Scripture not only allowed the making of images, but commanded it. So, what God prohibited is worship of images not making of it. What bible forbids is making of idols so to say. The command, “Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image”, is a wrong translation and is not to be understood absolutely.

However, the Lord God commanded Moses and the Israelites to make graven or molten images in several passages of the bible. God himself was the first to make images according to the words of the scripture: Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.... So God created man and woman in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27).

That the Lord God requested Moses to make graven image is clear from the following: "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 (Ark of the Covenant). Make one cherub (angel) on the one end and one cherub on the other end; on 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). As we have seen, God commanded Moses to construct the Ark of the Covenant and place upon it two images of angels with outstretched wings over the Ark. God promised to be visiting the Israelites before the Ark. If making of images is evil God would not command Moses to make it and place it where He (God) usually comes to meet his people on their journey to the Promise Land. “There I will meet with you, and... from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you of all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel” (**Exod25:22**).

The people of Israel knew that the Ark was the symbol of God’s powerful presence among them. God promised to be with them through the Ark which was a hammered work of man’s hand

overlaid with the graven images of two angels that spread their wings over it. Before this Mercy Seat they shall invoke the name of Yahweh their God and he shall always answer them there. The Psalmist while acknowledging the Ark as the representation of God's strength has to say: "Rise up, O LORD, and go up to your resting place, you and the ark of your might" (Psalm 132:8).

Prior to the construction of the Ark or Mercy seat as it can be called, God was leading the people with a *pillar of cloud* by day and a *pillar of fire* during the night as the people journeyed from Egypt to the Holy land through the desert (Ex. 13:21-22). When the **Ark** which is now representing the presence of Yahweh was constructed, it replaced the *pillar of cloud* and the *pillar of fire*. The power of Yahweh was manifested through the Mercy Seat such that as soon as the priests stepped into the river Jordan with it, the water was divided and the people were able to pass on dry land (Jos. 3:13-17). Why did God need the Ark in order to perform this miracle? Why not divide the Jordan by simply giving the command or why did he ask Moses to wave his staff over the red sea so that dry land would appear for the Israelites to pass? Why did he make use of the staff, which was a product of the human hand, to perform those miracles? God can decide to use created items or even the work of human hand to carry out the deliverance of his people.

The Ark with images of angels upon it not only symbolizes God's abiding presence but also his protecting and saving power. Remember that both the Ark and the cherubim on it were objects made of woods by human hands. Yet when the Philistines defeated the Israelites in battle, the elders of Israel said: Let us bring the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." (1 Sam. 4:3). Thus the people of Israel never doubted the fact that God was showing his power through that Ark.

When Israel was defeated even with the Ark all hope was lost. Eli the priest, on hearing that the ark of God has been captured, fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, and on account of this hopeless news, his daughter –in-law immediately gave birth prematurely and named

the child Ichabod, meaning: "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." (1 Sam 4:10-22).

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod; then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon their god and placed it beside Dagon. But when they rose early the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were laying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day, according to the bible. The hand of the LORD was heavy upon the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and struck them with tumors, both in Ashdod and in its territory. And when the inhabitants of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us; for his hand is heavy on us and on our god Dagon" (1 Sam 5:1-7). So God was powerfully present in that Covenant Box called Ark. 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 of this he made clear by the writing of the hand of the Lord, concerning 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.

Further, in 1 Kings 6, Solomon built a temple for the glory of God, described as follows: "In the inner sanctuary he made two cherubim (figures of angels) of olivewood, each ten cubits high. . . . He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house. . . . He carved all the walls of the house roundabout with carved figures of cherubim and palm trees, and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms. . . . For the entrance to the inner sanctuary he made doors of olivewood. . . . He covered the two doors of olivewood with carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers; he overlaid them with gold" (1 Kgs. 6:23, 27, 29, 31, 32). If God has actually placed blanket ban on making of images, then why all these in the temple of the Holy God? King Solomon ordered the construction of multiple images of things both "in heaven above" (angels) and "in the earth beneath" (palm trees and open flowers). And then, after

the completion of the temple, God declared he was pleased with its construction (1 Kgs. 9:3). Didn't God know what King Solomon had done?

It becomes apparent, given the above evidence, that a strictly literal interpretation of Exodus 20:2–5 is erroneous. It is therefore very clear from the biblical passages: 1 Kgs. 6:29–35, 8:6–7; 2 Chr. 3:7–14) that rather than prohibit the making of statues or images of various creatures, God orders it for religious purposes.

Similarly, Ezekiel 41:17–18, 25 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 (statues) likenesses of cherubim." There was nothing in the portion of the temple of Jerusalem called "holy of holies" except the Ark containing the graven tablets of the Ten Commandments and the molten image of angels over it.

When the people of Israel spoke against God and Moses, they were attacked by poisonous snakes that killed many of them. When Moses prayed to the Lord on account of this, He commanded him thus: "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and all those who looked at this bronze serpent on a pole were healed. (Num. 21:8–9).

This is a clear case of God using graven image even to effect healing and salvation. It indicates that statues could be used ritually, not merely as religious decorations. Jesus approved this by making allusion to it thus: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). So, the bronze serpent was a figure of Christ.

The Molten or Brazen sea was a large basin or reservoir for water in the temple of Jerusalem made by Solomon for ablution of the priests. It is placed at the south-eastern corner of the inner court upon twelve molten oxen; three of these oxen facing east, three facing west, three facing north and three facing south (I Kings 7:23-27; II Chronicles 4:2-5).

The throne of the king of Israel, had six steps leading up to it, with the figures of a lion at each end of every step, a total of 12 lions. At the back of the throne was a carved figure of a bull's head and beside each of the two arms was a figure of a lion. No throne like this had ever existed, according to the bible (I kings 6:18; 7:36; 10:19-20).

### **Images and Statues Have Inspirational Values**

The Catholic Church does not believe that any statue or image has any power in and of itself. The beauty of statues and icons move us to the contemplation of the Word of God as he is himself or as he works in his saints. And, according to Scripture, as well as the testimony of the centuries, God even uses them at times to impart blessings (e.g., healings) according to his providential plan.

Just as one remembers one's mother and other loved ones by looking at their photographs, statues help to recall the holy lives and the exemplary works of the saints by looking at their pictures. In antiquity and in the time of Christ Jesus, camera was not yet invented. Carving or sculpturing was among the principal mode of representation.

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. *Images do not speak about themselves rather they are symbols and signs that speak and stand for another thing outside themselves. An image creates deeper and indelible impression on the mind of people more than even a million words can achieve.* Hence, Confucius says that an image is worth more than million words. The best way to define a table is to bring a table and say: "this is a table". Professional teachers know better that using audio-visual aid or visible teaching materials in learning not only enhances understanding but makes knowledge more vivid, indelible and unforgettable.

If we judge Protestants by the same rule in the use of "graven" images, they would be guilty of the "idolatry" which they accuse



Catholics of because they not only take pictures but make use of pictures. Yet they do not intend to worship them at all. God forbids the *worship* of images as gods, but he does not prohibit the making of images for other good purposes.

### **Bowing or Kneeling in Worship**

Is all kneeling gesture of worship? What of the command of God: "You shall not bow down to them." What actually the bible is saying here is "bowing down in worship or adoration". The emphasis is "do not bow down in *worship* to them". This is clear even in the statement: "You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no graven image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land, *to bow down to them*; for I am the LORD your God (**Leviticus 26:1**)". 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. Yet the intension of Catholics is never to worship them as one would worship God.

Though bowing can be used as a posture in worship, **not all bowing or kneeling is worship**. In some cultures, like Japan or Yoruba, people show respect by bowing in greeting. Similarly, a person can kneel before a king without worshipping him as a god. In the same way, a Catholic who kneels in front of a statue while praying has no slightest intention of worshipping the statue or even praying to *it*, any more than the Protestant who kneels with a Bible in his hands or a table before him when praying is worshipping the Bible or the table, or even praying to them. Every act of kneeling down is not worship; one's intention has to be considered. Any Catholic who kneels down before a statue for the purpose of worshipping or even praying to it is ignorant of the Catholic teaching and as such may be guilty of idolatry.

The problem was not with the bowing; it was with the adoration. Bowing does not necessarily entail adoration. For example, Jacob bowed to the ground on his knees seven times to his elder brother Esau (Gen. 33:3), Bathsheba bowed to her husband David (1 Kgs. 1:16), and Solomon bowed to his mother Bathsheba (1 Kgs. 2:19). In fact, in Revelation 3:9, John records the words of Jesus: Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them

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come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you.

**Conclusion**

Is clear from the above discussion that what bible condemned is idolatry and not keeping of carved objects or figures. The bible not only allowed making and keeping of images but commands making and keeping of them as have been clearly pointed out above. Also, not all kneeling or bowing is worship especial the ones with social and secular intentions. Catholics keep images in the Church not to worship them but for remembrance and for instructions.