

What About Graven Images?

Statues, Icons, Relics, and the Second Commandment

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I. The Charge at the Church Door

Walk into a Catholic church and the first thing many visitors notice is what a Kingdom Hall and most Protestant chapels have carefully excluded: images. Statues of Mary and the saints, a crucifix over the altar, windows full of figures, perhaps a relic beneath the altar stone. To millions of sincere Christians—and to every Jehovah’s Witness—the sight reads as an open violation of one of the Ten Commandments, and the charge comes with a companion accusation: that Catholic catechisms renumber the commandments to hide the offense. For a former Witness the charge lands with special force, since the Watchtower teaches from childhood that the statues themselves settle which religion is false.

This essay takes the charge at full strength, concedes at the outset everything that deserves conceding—the relic frauds were real, the abuses were real, and the Church herself has

legislated against both—and then asks the only question that decides the matter: what does the commandment forbid, and who gets to say so? The witnesses called will be, in order: the rest of the Torah, the Hebrew text’s own counting, Martin Luther’s catechism, the Incarnation, a golden calf, a dead man in Elisha’s grave, and the painted walls of the Roman catacombs.

II. The Objection at Full Strength

State it whole, because it is a serious argument. “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; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:4–5). Making, bowing, serving: three verbs, all forbidden. A church full of carved figures, with candles burning before them and worshipers kneeling toward them, appears to be doing all three.

Moses supplies the rationale: “you saw no form” when the LORD spoke at Horeb, therefore make no form (Deut. 4:15–16). Israel’s God distinguished Himself from every neighbor exactly here—their temples held statues; His held an empty mercy seat. To this the Protestant adds history: the Spanish council of Elvira, around 306, ruled against pictures in churches; the Byzantine iconoclasts fought images for a century; and the medieval relic trade—enough wood of the true cross, Calvin jeered, to fill a ship—shows where the practice leads. And to the Catholic distinction between adoration and veneration, the objection answers: Aaron called the golden calf “a feast to the LORD” (Ex. 32:5), and three thousand died anyway. Intentions do not sanitize the act.¹

III. The Commandment That Kept Company with Cherubim

Now read the commandment where it lives. The three verbs—make, bow, serve—describe one act: the manufacture of a god for worship. That the ban was never on religious imagery as such is proved by the Lawgiver Himself, in the same books of Moses. Two cherubim of hammered gold were commanded for the ark of the covenant itself, the most sacred object in Israel (Ex. 25:18–20). Cherubim were woven into the tabernacle’s curtains (Ex. 26:1). Solomon’s temple was carved throughout with cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers; its great basin stood on twelve bronze oxen; lions flanked its steps—and when it was dedicated, the glory of the LORD filled the house (1 Kings 6–8). If the commandment forbade sacred images as such, the God who gave it violated it by decree.

The bronze serpent completes the lesson, because its story runs the whole arc. When Israel was dying of serpent bites, God commanded Moses to *make an image*—“Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (Num. 21:8). An image, divinely commanded, divinely used for blessing—and Jesus took

it as a figure of His own crucifixion (John 3:14). Then, centuries later, when Israel had begun burning incense to that same serpent, King Hezekiah smashed it, and Scripture praises him for it (2 Kings 18:4). There is the whole Catholic doctrine in one Old Testament object: the image commanded, the image honored, and the image destroyed the moment it was worshiped. The line runs not between having images and refusing them, but between honor and adoration—exactly where the Church draws it.²

IV. Who Hid the Commandment? Ask Luther

The renumbering charge has a short answer with a Lutheran accent. The Hebrew text numbers nothing. Scripture calls the Decalogue “the ten words” (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13) and leaves the dividing to its readers—which is why three counting traditions exist. The Jewish tradition makes “I am the LORD your God” the first word. The Augustinian tradition, followed by the Catholic Church, reads the image clause as explication of “you shall have no other gods”—one commandment about one sin—and recovers the count of ten from the two distinct objects of coveting in Deuteronomy 5:21. The tradition used by the Reformed churches separates the image clause as a second commandment and combines the coveting. Augustine proposed his division around the year 400, a thousand years before anyone had a statue controversy to hide.³

And the decisive detail: Martin Luther’s own Small Catechism—the formation text of Protestantism’s first church, in print since 1529 and memorized by Lutheran children to this day—numbers the commandments exactly as Rome does. If the Catholic numbering buries idolatry, Luther buried it too, and no one has yet accused him of a weakness for statues. Meanwhile the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* prints Exodus 20:4 in full and devotes a titled article to what it forbids and what it permits. A church hiding a verse does not print the verse in its catechism under a heading.⁴

V. “You Saw No Form”—Until You Did

The strongest form of the objection is Deuteronomy’s, and it deserves the most careful answer. Israel saw no form at Horeb; therefore Israel must portray none. The Catholic reply is that the argument proves exactly as much as it says. Israel could not portray the unseen God without inventing Him—every image would have been a lie about a form He had not taken. The command guarded a fact about God as He had then revealed Himself.

But “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory” (John 1:14). Christ is “the image [*eikōn*] of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The God who once had no form has taken one—seen, touched, remembered by eyewitnesses, and drawn from memory in the first generations. That is why the seventh ecumenical council—Nicaea II, in 787, three

centuries before East and West divided, a council of the same undivided Church that gave Christians their creed and their canon—ruled that images of Christ and His saints may be made and venerated. The council’s deepest argument was Christological: to refuse every image of Christ is quietly to doubt that He truly came in the flesh. And its guardrail, quoted to this day in the Catechism from St. Basil, keeps the practice from becoming the abuse: “the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype.” Honor a picture of the King, and it is the King you honor; burn one, and it is the King you insult—a logic every nation with a flag already understands.⁵

VI. Bowing, Kissing, and the Golden Calf

Does the distinction survive outside the textbooks? The objection says the peasant kissing the statue has abolished it. But if gestures of reverence toward objects are idolatry as such, the abolition runs everywhere. A Protestant who kisses his Bible, weeps over a photograph of his mother, or would be sickened to see the flag burned is not worshiping paper, emulsion, or cloth; he knows, without a theology lecture, that regard passes through an object to what it stands for. Scripture treats bowing the same way: Solomon bows to his mother Bathsheba (1 Kings 2:19); Joshua falls on his face before the ark (Josh. 7:6); Israel bows toward the holy temple (Ps. 138:2)—honor, not adoration, and no prophet objects. What Scripture never tolerates is sacrifice—the act that is worship by definition—offered to anyone or anything but God.⁶

Which is why the golden calf convicts the wrong defendant. Aaron’s feast failed not because pious intentions were present but because the calf was made *to be* a god: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Ex. 32:4)—a manufactured object receiving sacrifice as divine. That is *latría* given to a creature, the precise thing Catholic teaching forbids toward every image, saint, and angel in existence; the Mass has never once been offered to a statue. The calf is not a counter-example to the Catholic distinction. It is the case the distinction exists to condemn—and the Church’s own history of smashing its equivalents, from Hezekiah’s serpent onward, is the distinction enforced.

VII. What Relics Are, and What Scripture Does with Bodies

Relics draw the loudest scorn, so strip away the frauds—which the Church prosecutes too—and ask what the practice itself claims: that the bodies of the holy are honorable, and that God is pleased to work through matter that has touched His friends. That claim is not medieval. It is biblical data. A dead man, thrown hastily into Elisha’s grave, “touched the bones of Elisha” and “revived, and stood on his feet” (2 Kings 13:21). The sick of Jerusalem were laid in the street so that Peter’s shadow might fall on them (Acts 5:15). “Handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left

them and the evil spirits came out of them” (Acts 19:12)—Paul’s work clothes, functioning precisely as relics, recorded by Luke without one word of censure. The woman with the hemorrhage reached for the tassel of Jesus’ garment, and power went out (Matt. 9:20–22).

A religion whose God raises the dead through a prophet’s bones has no principled quarrel left with the reverent keeping of a martyr’s. The quarrel that remains is with abuses—multiplication, commerce, credulity—and there the Church is on the objector’s side, and was before the objector arrived: the Council of Trent, with the Reformers’ charges on the table, ordered the bishops by name to remove “all superstition” and “all filthy lucre” from the veneration of relics and images. Calvin’s satire lands on practices the Church’s own council condemned in his lifetime.⁷

VIII. Elvira, the Catacombs, and the Iconoclasts

What of the claim that the early Church knew better? One local Spanish synod, Elvira, around 306, did rule against pictures in churches, and honesty keeps the canon on the table. But in the same generations, the Christians of Rome were painting Jonah and Daniel, the Good Shepherd, the loaves, and the raising of Lazarus on the walls of the catacombs—over the very tombs of their martyrs, in the age of persecution, wherever they had walls of their own. The archaeological record does not show an aniconic early Church that later fell from purity; it shows Christian art as old as Christian burial, one cautious council notwithstanding.⁸

The iconoclast century proves the same thing in reverse. It took imperial decrees, depositions, and a persecution to *remove* the images the faithful already loved—monks died protecting them—and when the dust settled, an ecumenical council of the undivided Church had defined why the faithful were right. A practice that must be torn out of the whole Church by force is not a late corruption of the Church’s faith. It is the Church’s faith, meeting an axe.

IX. The Line, and Who Drew It

Gather the case. The commandment, read in its own books, forbids the manufacture of gods—and keeps company with commanded cherubim, a carved and glory-filled temple, and a healing bronze serpent that was rightly smashed the day it was worshiped. The numbering carries no conspiracy: the text counts nothing, Augustine divided it a millennium before the quarrel, and Luther’s catechism stands beside Rome’s. The Incarnation answered Deuteronomy’s “you saw no form” with a Face, and the undivided Church’s seventh council drew the conclusion and built the guardrail: honor passes to the prototype; adoration belongs to God alone. The golden calf breaks against that guardrail,

not against Catholic practice. And the bodies of the holy carry blessing in Scripture's own narratives, handkerchiefs and bones and shadow alike.

The reader formed by the Watchtower is owed the last word, because the charge was aimed at him most directly. The empty Kingdom Hall wall was presented to you as purity. But the God of the Bible is not an aniconic abstraction; He decorated His own dwelling, prescribed an image to heal His people, and finally sent His Son to be seen. The question was never whether images may exist in the house of God—He settled that on Sinai, in the same breath as the commandment. The question is only whether anything made with hands receives what belongs to the Maker. On that, the Catholic Church and the Book of Exodus have always said the same thing: never. The saints behind the statues, and what asking their prayers means, is the subject of this site's essay on the communion of saints; this one rests its narrower conclusion here: the commandment Rome is accused of breaking is one her own Scriptures will not let mean what the accusation needs.⁹

Endnotes

1. Exodus 20:4–5; Deuteronomy 4:15–18; 5:8–9; Exodus 32:1–6, 28; Council of Elvira, canon 36; John Calvin, *A Treatise on Relics* (1543). Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. Exodus 25:18–20; 26:1; 1 Kings 6:23–35; 7:25–36; 8:10–11; Numbers 21:8–9 with John 3:14; 2 Kings 18:4.
3. Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 4:13 (“the ten words”); Deuteronomy 5:21 for the two objects of coveting; Augustine, *Questions on Exodus* 71.
4. Luther's Small Catechism (1529), the Ten Commandments; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§2083–2141, with the image question treated directly at §§2129–2132.
5. John 1:14; Colossians 1:15; John 14:9; Second Council of Nicaea (787); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2132, quoting Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 18, 45.
6. 1 Kings 2:19; Joshua 7:6; Psalm 138:2.
7. 2 Kings 13:21; Acts 5:15; 19:11–12; Matthew 9:20–22; Council of Trent, Session XXV (1563), *On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images*.
8. On the third-century frescoes of the Catacombs of Callixtus and Priscilla—the Jonah cycles, the Good Shepherd, the banquet scenes—see any standard survey of early Christian art.
9. See the essay accompanying “The Communion of Saints” on this site.

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, “You Shall Not Make For Yourself a Graven Image”—the Church’s own treatment of the commandment, quoting it in full. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_two/chapter_one/article_1/iv_you_shall_not_make_for_yourself_a_graven_image_.html.

Second Council of Nicaea (787)—the seventh ecumenical council’s definition on sacred images. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum07.htm>.

Council of Trent, Session XXV—on invocation, relics, and images, including the order to root out superstition and profiteering. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/twenty-fifth-session.htm>.

The Communion of Saints—the doctrine behind the statues. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/weft/saints/saints.php>.

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“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” — John 1:14

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic teaching on sacred images and relics*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.