

You Shall Not Bow Down

Catholics and Protestants divide the 10 commandments differently. Following the early catholic church and the Orthodox Church, Protestants consider the prohibition against other gods and the prohibition against images as separate commandments. The Jews however considered them as a single commandment, and from the time of Augustine, the Latin church has also followed that tradition.

That does not mean that the Catholic Church has removed the second commandment. The Church does not delete the prohibition against images from Catholic Bible versions or its major catechisms.

But the prohibition against image worship is left out, and effectively hidden, in the abbreviated lists of the 10 commandments commonly used to teach children. While it is perfectly acceptable to summarize the commandments to facilitate memorization, it is wrong to present the abridged form as if it is the whole commandment. Many Catholic children, including myself, grew up without ever having heard that such a prohibition is part of God's law.

Unlike the Jews (who do not worship images), the Catholic tradition contradicts the plain meaning of the commandment by permitting and encouraging the faithful to make, bow down before, and serve images. The Second Council of Nicea goes as far as condemning with a curse (anathema) those of us who do not salute such representations as standing for the Lord and his saints. [\[1\]](#)

Someone might object along these lines:

Catholics do not worship the Cross or images or relics. They use these physical objects to remind themselves of Christ and his special friends, the saints in heaven. The man who keeps a picture of his family in his wallet does not worship his wife and children, but honours them. (Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, Ignatius, 1988, pp 40, 41).

This kind of argument is popular and easily understood. Who would think that keeping a picture of your family is wrong? Surely Protestants too keep pictures of their loved ones. Why then should anyone object to pictures or statues to remind us of Christ?

I have often been told that an image of Christ is like a picture of my wife that I keep in my wallet to remind me of her. The analogy is misleading. The pictures of Christ are not really pictures of Christ; they are but the imagination of the artist. What is called "Christ" is not a likeness of Christ at all. My wife would not be particularly delighted if I keep a picture of another woman, kiss it, and call her my wife!

Besides, the popular argument for images is evasive and irrelevant; it does not do justice to the Catholic doctrine. It claims that "Catholics do not worship the Cross or images", but St Thomas Aquinas states otherwise. "[The Cross] it is worshipped with the same adoration as

Christ, viz. the adoration of latria.” And again, “we give the adoration of latria to the image of Christ” (Summa Theologica, Third Part, Question 25). [2]

As a Catholic, you do not use images merely to “remind” yourself of Christ and the saints. There’s nothing wrong with having pictures and statues to remind us of King David or the apostle Paul. But that is beside the point. You are called to do more than just remember. You are called to kiss images and even to bow down before them.

“...because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which they represent, so that by means of the images which we kiss and before which we uncover the head and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ and venerate the saints whose likeness they bear” (Council of Trent, Session 25, On the Invocation, Veneration, Relics of Saints, and Sacred Images.) [3]

Your intention is undoubtedly right and noble -- you want to worship Christ. But our good intentions are not good enough when our actions contradict the clear teaching of God’s Word. God told us how to worship and we would better listen: “You shall not carve idols for yourselves ... you shall not bow down before them or worship them.”

When the people of Israel were gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, and Moses was delayed on the mountain, they demanded a visible representation of God. When Aaron produced the golden calf, the people acclaimed the appearance of their God: “This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 32 NAB) [4] They knew that the Lord God had delivered them from the slavery in Egypt, and accepted the newly-formed image as a representative of their powerful Redeemer. Evidently Aaron shared their belief because he went on to build an altar and proclaim a feast “to the LORD (Yahweh)”.

Immediately after those events, the Bible records God’s intense displeasure with his people because they worshipped “his” image. He had told them not to bow down before statues – how could they delude themselves in thinking that they would please God by contradicting his will?

We would be wise to learn from the mistakes of our forefather. If we bow down before the images of Christ and the saints, irrespective of our good intentions, we would be disobedient to the commandment of God: “You shall not bow down before them”! If we truly love our God, we should worship him only in the way he has revealed.