

Q: Do Catholic's Worship Statues?

Seeing Catholics kneeling before statues and other sacred art, some have accused them of idolatry -the giving to another creature or object the worship due to God alone. Some even claim that the Catholic Church removed the Second Commandment, "*You shall not make for yourself a graven (loosely defined as "carved or etched") image*", so that statue worship would seem permissible.

These are serious charges, but are completely unfounded. First, let's be clear: Catholics absolutely **DO NOT** worship statues or images in any form. Worship is reserved for God alone. Idolatry **in ANY form** is absolutely condemned. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (**CCC 2110-2114**) spells this out clearly. Anyone who suggests otherwise is mistaken and seriously misrepresents Catholic teaching.

So a Catholic kneeling in prayer at a statue or image is absolutely not worshipping or praying to that that statue. Maybe they are asking the person represented by the statue for their intercession, or maybe they are inspired to prayer by the particular saint's holy example. But they are not praying/talking to that statue, or asking a particular saint [or statue!] to do what only God has the power to do.

Sacred art is used to evangelize, catechize and inspire. It is also used to show reverence and honor for God and His saints. When a Catholic kneels or bows in prayer before a statue, they are not worshipping it in any way whatsoever. They are using it as a person might use a picture of his family -to recall them, even pray for them, when he is not with them. He obviously does not consider a picture of his children as being his actual children, but simply a reminder of them. And so it is with sacred art in any form. It is used ultimately to raise our hearts and minds to God – to aid us in prayer [honoring/venerating the Saints and asking for their intercessory prayers will be a future topic].

But what about the numbering of the Ten Commandments? The Bible states that God gave Moses several directives under the form of ten commandments (**Deuteronomy 4:13**), but does not group and number them specifically (and they can be grouped into ten groups in more than one reasonable way). Consequently, while the Church has clearly defined all the teachings contained in the Ten Commandments, it has not dogmatically defined how they are to be organized/numbered (**CCC 2066**). The present Catechism follows the numbering proposed by St. Augustine, which follows the oldest known Hebraic numbering of the 10 Commandments that we have from the Dead Sea Scrolls. This was also the numbering adopted by Martin Luther! Many Protestants are unaware of this significant detail.

So where does the specific numbering controversy occur? Some Christians consider the Second Commandment to be: *“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them”* (**Deuteronomy 5:8-9**). They then group the directives, *“Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor's house... field... or anything that is your neighbor's”* (**Deuteronomy 5:21**), into one as the Tenth Commandment.

Catholics, on the other hand, consider the verses forbidding the making and worshipping of graven images to be part of the First Commandment. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the un-summarized First Commandment reads: *“I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me. **You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything... in heaven... in the earth... or... in the water... you shall not bow down to them or serve them**”* (**Ex 20:2-5**).

Case closed! Clearly, Catholics have **NOT** removed the “Second Commandment”, but have included the directives forbidding creating and worshipping graven images in the First Commandment – just as St Augustine, the early Jews and Martin Luther did – because they are naturally part of it: to worship God alone, and nothing else.

Catholics then consider the Ninth Commandment as, *“you shall not covet your neighbor's wife”*, and the Tenth as *“you shall not desire your neighbor's house... field... or anything that is your neighbor's”*, recognizing the dignity of a person's spouse and not grouping them with one's general possessions.

But some still contend that having statues at all breaks the commandment, *“You shall not make... a graven image...”* [again, the word, “graven” means something non-living, that is sculpted, carved or engraved by man's hand]. The Church answers by saying that the context of **Exodus 20:1-6**, especially, *“you shall not bow down to them or serve them”*, indicates that this prohibition applies only to images created for the purpose of worship and idolatry. It is not the making of statues or images that is the problem, it is making them **to worship** -that is the issue!

Looking a little harder at **Exodus 20:1-6**, if it is taken absolutely literally and out of context, you could argue that it does not allow for the making of an image or statue of virtually *anything* on earth –no statues/artwork of animals, no etchings or carvings of mountains –nothing! This sounds unreasonable because it is –it is not what the commandment is getting at. It is simply referring to and prohibiting the creation of images for the purpose of idolatrous worship, something the Israelites struggled with for centuries in the Old Testament.

In fact, shortly after giving the Ten Commandments in **Exodus 20**, God **commands** Moses to make two large, golden statues of cherubim for the Ark of the Covenant (**Ex 25:1-18**, and similarly for the temple in **1 Chr 28:8-19**). Moses was also **commanded** to make “*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**). Centuries, later when some began to worship it as a god (“Nehushtan”), King Hezekiah destroyed it (**2 Kgs 18:4**).

So while the numbering of the Ten Commandments may not be specified in Scripture, the heart of The Law certainly is: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart...”. Let this guide all we do.

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