

Brief on Idols vs Lawful Images¹

By Richard Joseph Michael Ibranyi

The First Commandment condemns all idols. An idol is an image or graven thing that is worshipped or adored as if it were God or a god:

“Thou shalt not have strange gods before me. Thou shalt not make to thyself an idol (a graven image), nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them: I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me:” (Ex. 20:3-5)

“I am the Lord your God, ye shall not make to yourselves gods made with hands or graven, neither shall ye rear up a pillar for yourselves, neither shall ye set up a stone for an object in your land to worship it. I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 26:1)

Therefore an image or graven thing is *not* an idol if it does not represent a false god or it is not worshipped or adored as if it were God or a god. One proof of this is that God commanded that images and graven things be placed in his Temple. For example, God ordained that his Temple have images of cherubs, lions, oxen, and faces of men:

“Thou shalt make also two cherubims of beaten gold on the two sides of the oracle. Let one cherub be on the one side and the other on the other. Let them cover both sides of the propitiatory, spreading their wings and covering the oracle; and let them look one towards the other, their faces being turned towards the propitiatory wherewith the ark is to be covered.” (Ex. 25:18-20)

“And he put them into the rings that were at the sides of the ark to carry it. He made also... Two cherubims also of beaten gold, which he set on the two sides of the propitiatory: One cherub in the top of one side, and the other cherub in the top of the other side: two cherubims at the two ends of the propitiatory, Spreading their wings, and covering the propitiatory, and looking one towards the other, and towards it.” (Ex. 37:5-9)

“And even to the inner house [of the Temple], and without all the wall round about within and without, by measure. ...there were cherubims and palm trees wrought, so that a palm tree was between a cherub and a cherub, and every cherub had two faces. The face of a man was toward the palm tree on one side, and the face of a lion was toward the palm tree on the other side: set forth through all the house round about...” (Ez. 41:17-20)

“And a graven work under the brim of it compassed it, for ten cubits going about the sea: there were two rows cast of chamfered sculptures [statutes]. And it stood upon twelve oxen... And between the little crowns and the ledges were lions, and oxen, and cherubims ... He engraved also in those plates, which were of brass, and in the corners, cherubims, and lions, and palm trees, in likeness of a man standing, so that they seemed not to be engraven, but added round about.” (3 Ki. 7:24-25, 29, 36)

“And there was nothing in the temple that was not covered with gold; the whole altar of the oracle he covered also with gold. And he made in the oracle two cherubims of olive tree of ten cubits in height... And he overlaid the cherubims with gold.” (3 Ki. 6:22-28)

“After the second veil [is] the tabernacle, which is called the holy of holies, over it were the cherubims of glory overshadowing the propitiatory.” (Heb. 9:3-5)

¹ RJMI's Briefs are Long Commentaries contained in the end of *The Catholic Bible*, revised by RJMI.

Beware, then, of the heretics who condemn all images and graven things as evil and sinful. If this were true, then God sinned by commanding images and graven things be made and placed in his Temple. And thus God would have violated his own First Commandment!

These heretics are also hypocrites because they have pictures of living or dead loved ones. Certainly these are images “of anything that is in heaven or in the earth.” Some even set up statues of loved ones or of famous men. Certainly, these are graven things. And they rightly believe that these are not idols as long as they do not worship the images as if they are God or a god or as if they are alive (as if the image itself is alive). But, in their lying hypocrisy, they condemn images or graven things that represent the true God, angels, and saints. If it is good for men to have pictures and statues of loved ones, how much more good is it for them to have pictures and statues of the true God, angels, and saints, as long as they do not look upon the pictures and statues as if they are alive and as long as they do not worship a creature the image or statue represents as if it were God or a god.

When Catholics pray in front of or venerate a holy image or statue, they do not believe that image or statue is living; and if the image is of a creature, they do not address the person or angel it represents as God or a god. When Catholics are venerating or praying before an image or statue, they pray to, talk to, and petition the person or angel it represents. In the same way, when a person who looks upon an image of a loved relative, living or dead, speaks to the loved one that the image represents through the picture and this is not idolatry, no matter if the loved one hears them or not.

The legitimate use of images and graven things was a dogma during the Old Testament era and thus is a dogma during the New Covenant era. Therefore, it is an ordinary magisterium dogma of the Catholic Church from Pentecost Day in AD 33 because it was held by the unanimous consensus of the Church Father (the apostles being the first Church Fathers of the Catholic Church). And it was also made a solemn magisterium dogma of the Catholic Church. For example,

Solemn Magisterium Definition: Pope Hadrian I, *Second Council of Nicea, 797*:
“We decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honoured and life-giving cross, the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or of other suitable material, are to be exposed in the holy churches of God, on sacred instruments and vestments, on walls and panels, in houses and by public ways, these are the images of our Lord, God and saviour, Jesus Christ, and of our Lady without blemish, the holy God-bearer, and of the revered angels and of any of the saintly holy men. The more frequently they are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration... Further, people are drawn to honour these images with the offering of incense and lights, as was piously established by ancient custom. Indeed, the honour paid to an image traverses it, reaching the model, and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image.”

To summarize:

- An idol is an image that represents a false god; such as an image of the false god Jupiter.
- An idol is an image that is thought to represent a false god even though it was not meant to represent a false god; such as a statue that was meant to honor a mere man in which some looked upon it as a god and thus adored it.
- An idol is an image that is good in and of itself (such as an image of God the Father, God the Son, or a saint) but is looked upon as God himself or the saint himself. And thus the image or statue is thought to be alive.

Here are some examples of an idol that is not only worshipped as God or a god but is thought to be alive:

“But the idol that is made by hands is cursed, as well it, as he that made it; he because he made it, and it because being frail it is called a god.” (Wis. 14:8)

“But unhappy are they and their hope is among the dead who have called gods the works of the hands of men, gold and silver, the inventions of art and the resemblances of beasts or an unprofitable stone the work of an ancient hand... and by the skill of his art fashioneth it and maketh it like the image of a man or the resemblance of some beast, laying it over with vermilion, and painting it red and covering every spot that is in it... and maketh a convenient dwelling place for it, and setting it in a wall, and fastening it with iron; providing for it lest it should fall, knowing that it is unable to help itself; for it is an image and hath need of help. And then maketh prayer to it, inquiring concerning his substance and his children or his marriage. And he is not ashamed to speak to that which hath no life.” (Wis. 13:10-17)

“He hath cut down cedars, taken the holm, and the oak that stood among the trees of the forest. He hath planted the pine tree which the rain hath nourished. And it hath served men for fuel. He took thereof and warmed himself, and he kindled it and baked bread but of the rest he made a god and adored it. He made a graven thing and bowed down before it. Part of it he burnt with fire, and with part of it he dressed his meat. He boiled pottage and was filled and was warmed, and said: Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire. But the residue thereof he made a god and a graven thing for himself; he boweth down before it and adoreth it and prayeth unto it, saying: Deliver me, for thou art my God.” (Isa. 44:14-17)

Here is an example of an image of a creature that of itself is not sinful but became sinful for those who looked upon it as God or a god or as representing God or a god:

“For a father, being afflicted with bitter grief, made to himself the image of his son who was quickly taken away; and him who then had died as a man, he began now to worship as a god and appointed him rites and sacrifices among his servants. Then in process of time, wicked custom prevailing, this error was kept as a law and statues were worshipped by the commandment of tyrants. And those whom men could not honour in presence because they dwelt far off, they brought their resemblance from afar and made an express image of the king whom they had a mind to honour, that by this their diligence, they might honour as present, him that was absent. And to the worshipping of these, the singular diligence also of the artificer helped to set forward the ignorant. For he being willing to please him that employed him, laboured with all his art to make the resemblance in the best manner. And the multitude of men, carried away by the beauty of the work took him now for a god that a little before was but honoured as a man.” (Wis. 14:15-20)

For the glory of God; in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael, St. Joseph, Ss. Joachim and Anne, St. John the Baptist, the other angels and saints; and for the salvation of men

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