

# On Saints and Statues

**Question:** A friend of mine told me that the Catholic Church is sinning by giving honor to the saints. He said we are guilty of idolatry, worshipping someone other than God. While I know this is not true, I couldn't explain it well enough. How do I respond to my friend's question?

**Answer:** Your friend's objection, while common, is based on a misunderstanding of our practice of giving honor to the saints. We are not in fact worshipping the saints at all. There are several levels of what in English is commonly called "worship". In matters of faith we are careful to make distinctions between them. The worship due only to God is what is called in Greek *latría*. (We take our English word idolatry" from this, meaning "false worship".) True worship is the praise and honor of God for whom He is and the humble submission of ourselves before His sovereign majesty. The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives the following explanation of worship of God:

"To adore [worship] God is to acknowledge, in respect and absolute submission, the 'nothingness of the creature' who would not exist but for God. To adore God is to praise and exalt him and to humble oneself, as Mary did in the Magnificat, confessing with gratitude that he has done great things and holy is his name. The worship of the one God sets man free from turning in on himself, from the slavery of sin and the idolatry of the world." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2097)

Hopefully, anyone would clearly see that this is not at all what Catholics do when we honor the saints. We show toward the saints what is called in

Greek *dulia*. (Our English word “adulation” comes from this word.) It is best translated as esteem or honor, but not as worship, certainly not as *latria*. We admire them somewhat like heroes. They are people who have lived this life and shown us that it can be done. They encourage us to keep the faith and remain in the ways of the Lord, knowing that if we follow their example, we too can obtain the glory of God’s Heavenly Kingdom. Some of them we honor as particular patrons, and we develop special devotion to certain saints due to their occupation, their homeland, their particular trial in life, or because we bear their name. So, for example, a doctor might have special devotion to St. Luke, the patron saint of physicians, because Luke was a physician. Irish Catholics have great devotion to St. Patrick because he Christianized Ireland. In Siena, Italy, St. Catherine is especially honored because she came from Siena. People with throat ailments turn to St. Blaise, who, according to legend, miraculously healed a young boy who was choking on a fish bone. Women named Ann might have great devotion to St. Ann because they bear her name. Or sometimes, people are simply affected by the saint’s life, and they find a helpful example in their story or their writings. And this is why the Church directs us to venerate the saints. They show us that this life can be lived according to the Gospel. They have survived the period of trial here on earth, and their life gives us an example and thereby strengthens us in our efforts to follow Jesus. We are not worshipping them; rather, we are turning to them to ask them to pray for us. It is best to say that we *venerate* them, but we *worship* God!

**Objection:** My friend also asked me why I feel I have to go through a saint? Why don’t I just go straight to God and pray to him?

**Response:** Have you ever asked a friend to pray for you? Wouldn’t you be surprised if your friend responded by saying, “Well, why are you asking me to pray for you? Why don’t you just go directly to God yourself?” I’m

sure you didn't mean to imply that you yourself were not going to pray for your need. You were asking your friend also to pray for you. That's what we're doing with the saints: *in addition to our own prayer*, we ask them to pray for us as well, since they are in God's Kingdom and can help perfect our prayer, as they are wiser than we. It's amazing that some people have no problem asking ministers, parents, friends and others to pray for them, but when we ask the saints to pray for us, they raise objections. If we can ask our friends on earth to pray for us, why can we not ask our friends in heaven to pray for - us as well? Who better to ask to pray for us than Christ's friends who are at his side? It is part of our belief in the Communion of Saints, that because we are one body in Christ, all the members of the body not only can but also should care for and be concerned about the welfare of the others. The saints in heaven are not excluded; on the contrary, they live in the fullness of the presence of Christ, and desire to be of help to us in our struggle to join them in God's Kingdom. This hits on another common misunderstanding: we are not really praying *to* the saints, but *through* them! No proper prayer asks a saint to respond directly to our need as if he were personally able to respond and grant our request. We ask the saint to pray for us. We're not praying to the saint *instead of* to Jesus; we're praying to Jesus *through the saint*, and asking him to pray with us. Are there abuses? Sure there are! It's bound to happen in any part of life that involves human beings. But we work hard to try to correct them. An example of a faulty notion of prayer that we're forever trying to correct is the "magical miracle prayers" that are often left in the candle racks in churches or are published in the personal pages of newspapers, usually on the same page as the obituaries. These prayers promise results if a person says the prayer and leaves copies in church. They claim the prayer is "never known to fail." Such prayers are not official Catholic prayers, are contrary to Catholic belief, and are not sanctioned by the Church. They are the product of probably well-intentioned individuals with a somewhat warped understanding of what

prayer is. Whenever we find those prayer sheets in our church, we simply throw them away. But just because some people distort and abuse the practice of involving the saints in our prayer doesn't mean the practice is bad. It is our job to correct abuses and help people understand what proper prayer is.

**Question:** My friend also said our practice of using statues is sinful because it violates the commandment to not make a graven image. Is he right?

**Answer:** No, he is not, although at first glance it may seem so. We need to understand precisely what God was forbidding when he forbade carving idols, or graven images. The commandment reads as such: "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them." (Ex 20: 4-5) We need, however, to understand the difference between an idol and a statue. In the ancient world, it was common practice for people to carve images and worship the image itself as if it were actually the god it represented. They thought the statue itself was the god. This was what was happening in the instance when the Israelites made the golden calf and worshipped it. They declared, "This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." (Ex 31:4) The Lord grew angry with the Israelites because they worshipped the calf *as if it were God Himself*. A similar situation can be seen in the Book of Genesis in the story of Rachel - Jacob's wife - who stole her father's household gods. Her father runs after Jacob asking him why he stole his gods. (cf Gen 31) The implication in this story is that she has stolen more than mere images: in effect, she has actually stolen his gods! This is what the commandment in fact prohibits. If someone were to enter our church and steal the crucifix, we'd have to go out and get a new one. No one, however, would think that Jesus Himself had actually been stolen from us.

Furthermore, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, “already in the Old Testament, God ordained or permitted the making of images that pointed symbolically toward salvation by the incarnate Word: so it was with the bronze serpent, the Ark of the Covenant, and the cherubim.” (Catechism, 2130) We must not forget that, with the incarnation of God as Man in the person of Jesus, we are under a new system. As proof of this, observe what happened at the Transfiguration of Jesus. In the Old Testament, it was forbidden for anyone to look upon the face of God and live. When God appeared before Moses on Mt. Sinai, God covered Moses’ face as He passed by, so that Moses could only see His back. (cf. Exodus 33:18-23) Similarly, when the Lord appeared to Elijah on the same mountain, when Elijah heard the voice of the Lord in the tiny whispering sound, *he hid his face* and stood at the entrance of the cave. (cf. 1 Kings 19:13) At the Transfiguration, however, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus as His glory is revealed, and they are permitted to look into His face. And not only they, but Peter, James, and John are also privileged by Jesus to do so. (cf. Mark 9:2-8) It is therefore clear that Jesus is introducing a new understanding of the relationship between God and man. While the Jews never called God by name, we now may do so freely by calling upon the name of Jesus. We can see Him, touch Him, even eat His body and drink His blood. By becoming man, God has introduced a completely new relationship with us, not one of fear and distance, but of love and closeness. The catechism continues,

“By becoming incarnate, the Son of God introduced a new ‘economy’ of images. The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, ‘the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype,’ and ‘whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it.’ The honor paid to sacred images is a ‘respectful

‘veneration,’ not the adoration due to God alone.” (Catechism, 2131, 2132. Quotes are from St. Basil.)

Basically, what the Church is saying is that, by venerating images of Jesus, and even the saints, the Blessed Mother and the angels, we are actually giving honor to Jesus Himself. We are honoring the person they represent, not the images themselves. It is interesting to notice that many people who object to the use of statues of Jesus or the saints have no problem with paintings or drawings of them. Well, statues are simply three-dimensional drawings. Surely God is not declaring that sin is determined by the number of dimensions in an image. That would be an example of the very hair-splitting differences for which Jesus criticized the Pharisees. How could anyone honestly say that a two-dimensional figure is holy but a three-dimensional one is idolatry? We must look to the heart of the law, not merely the letter of the law. Once again, it is important that we remember the significance of the Incarnation, of God becoming man. In doing so, He has introduced a new order - a new economy - of salvation. Because Jesus took on flesh, He has brought the divine into our world in a human way, so that our representation of Him or of anyone who now beholds Him face to face has become a pious act. Since we can now view God in human form, we can also represent Him in human form and venerate that image - and the image of any creature in His kingdom, including the angels and saints - for in doing so, we reflect upon the fact that our mortal flesh has been called to share in the dignity that is His and that has been granted to those in His kingdom. He has taken on our nature so that we can take on His.