

Against Idolatry – Part II

In my previous pastor's notes, I talked about our Catholic understanding of worship of God as opposed to idolatry and pantheism. This week, I would like to focus on the critique that many of our separated brothers and sisters of the Christian faith (the Protestants) make concerning the piety and devotion that Catholics have surrounding sacred images, statues, and the veneration of saints. First of all, we make distinction between worship and veneration. This comes from two Greek words, *latria*, meaning worship, and *dulia*, meaning devotion or veneration. *Latria*, – i.e., worship/adoration, is given to God and God alone, while *dulia* – i.e., devotion/veneration – is extended to all associated with the Divine, namely His saints, angels, and the faith that He has given to us. This has always been a very clear distinction for Catholics, but is the source of the confusion with our Protestant brothers and sisters.

The Church universal had to deal with this issue definitively at the Second Council of Nicea, held in 787. From the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC § 2132 and § 2141):

2132 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:

Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is.

2141 *The veneration of sacred images is based on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. It is not contrary to the first commandment.*

The summary from this Council is that images of Jesus Christ, True God and True Man, are legitimately venerated by the faithful, because God, who is pure Spirit, and who is therefore invisible, took on human form in the person of Jesus Christ, making Himself visible and discernible to our senses. In the unity of Divinity and in sacred humanity, in the person of Jesus Christ, God makes the Divine visible, and therefore we can rightly venerate an image of Jesus Christ, keeping in mind that "the honor rendered to the image passes on to its prototype". This is considered the "classic passage" for the veneration of sacred images. Therefore, we adore and worship God alone. When it comes to images of God, we venerate the image, so as to adore and worship God whom it represents. When it comes to images of the saints, we venerate the image, so as to venerate the person whom it represents as one who is in friendship with the one true God, whom alone we adore. And therefore, when we light a candle before the image of a saint, it is symbolic of our prayer that the saint take our request before the face of God, to whom they have immediate access. Relics fall into this same category of veneration, inasmuch as they are the very matter that will participate in the Resurrection on the Last Day. Saints are those whom we know to be in the Beatific Vision! Thus, we rightly venerate them by means of a pious kiss or other signs of devotion. Again, this all stems from the Incarnational aspect of our Catholic faith. God took on our flesh, and made our bodies to be joined to His, and in this way elevates the material world to a sacramental level. This means that through material things and physical gestures, we are able to accomplish spiritual realities, such as worship and veneration.

Applied to the recent issues that arose at the Amazon Synod, we go back to the principle of baptizing the practices of natural religion, but here we have to make an essential distinction. While we venerate images of God and Jesus Christ, of the saints, especially Our Lady (to whom is due a higher veneration than all the other saints – *hyperdulia*), we do have to make a clear break from any deification of natural things. That would confuse the faithful and induce them or encourage them to give *latria* to human beings or inanimate objects, such as the earth or any other graven image depicting the earth. I believe that this lack of clarity and distinction is what caused the confusion that arose from the Amazon Synod. It is essential that we make this clear distinction that "mother" earth is not to be worshipped as if the material matter that makes up planet Earth – or even the "spirit" or poetic concept of the earth as the giver of the material that makes up life – is any more than a mere creature that owes all to God, the Creator.

Perhaps in a future pastor's notes, we can explore the concepts of proper and due respect for the created world and the stewardship of the good things that God has entrusted to us since the beginning. These, I believe, are the legitimate themes of recent pontifical declarations and should be a legitimate source of an examination of conscience. However, all of these things must be stated as clearly as possible, and clarifying erroneous understandings and misinterpretations that heretofore have been left cloudy.

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