

Sacred Images

The Catholic Church has always been the mother of the arts, and her use of sacred images has inspired artists of every type to do their best work. The finest mosaics of the early Christian era, the best metal work in the Middle Ages, the greatest productions of the Renaissance painters and sculptors, the most magnificent stained-glass windows of all time—all these are the products inspired sons of the Church. Religious art reached its highest development in works like the Last Supper, painted by Leonardo da Vinci on the refectory wall of a Dominican convent in Milan; the Madonna by Raphael, and Michelangelo's sculpture, such as the Pieta in St. Peter's in Rome. Copies of many famous religious art works can be found in museums and in books available to everyone.

Reformation fanaticism almost stifled religious art, and no age since Protestantism's rise has produced anything to rival the work of Catholic geniuses in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. After an era of near stagnation, there is now a revival of craftsmanship and artistry that marked the Age of Faith. Artists world-wide are making crucifixes and images worthy of the sacred subjects they represent.

Every Christian home should have its sacred images, pictures and statues to increase the devotion of the family and to create an atmosphere that will better the lives of all who dwell within its walls. In every home there should be at least a crucifix and pictures or statues of Christ and His Mother. If possible, every bedroom should have a crucifix, if only a small one. The presence of sacred images tends to

make those who live in the home think of those virtues of Christ and the Saints which everyone should imitate. There is no better protection against temptation than contemplation of the crucifix, which recalls the sufferings of Christ for the sins of mankind. In some homes, devout Christians set up small shrines of the Sacred Heart, our Lady, or some favorite saint. Before them flowers are placed, candles sometimes burn, and family devotions are held. Especially in May, many families honor Mary by erecting shrines for daily prayer. These customs bring rich blessings to those who practice them. Not the images or the shrines, but the holy thoughts they inspire, the prayers they provoke, and the transformation they effect are the things that merit bountiful spiritual rewards.

1. (See Basil of Ceasarea, *De Spiritu s. (The Holy Spirit)* 18, 45 (PG 32, 149; SC 17, 194.)
2. (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1914, Vol. 7, P. 668).
3. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Georgetown, Sheed & Ward, Ed. Norman P. Tanner, 1990, Vol. 1, pp. 135-136).
4. *Collectio Rituum*, Catholic Book Publishing Company, New York, 1964, pp. 243-245.

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How is the use of images restricted by the first commandment? Cite instances in which God Himself commanded the use of images in Old Testament times. How do we know that the first Christians made pictures and statues of Christ and the saints?

The first commandment of God says: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Exodus 20:4-5). This would seem to forbid any representations of men or other creatures, but a proper understanding of the commandment shows that the real force of the prohibition is in the words: "you shall not bow down to them or serve them." What God forbids is not the use of images, but their worship. Such is the age old doctrine of the Catholic Church.

This interpretation of the first commandment must be correct, for God Himself ordered Moses to place two cherubim of beaten gold upon the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18) and to set up a brazen image of the fiery serpent in the desert (Numbers 21:8-9). Many Jews were nevertheless, bitterly opposed to images, and some early Christians too feared that images might lead to idol worship. But the Roman catacombs contain many sacred pictures and statues, and archeologists have proved that in the East also images were frequently used by the first Christians.

Who were the Iconoclasts? What was their Aim? How long did the Iconoclast disorders continue? Give an example of “image-breaker” tactics used in the time of the Protestant Revolt.

By the eighth century, images called “icons” in the East were universally used, and some abuses had crept in. There were images everywhere. “they hung in a place of honor in every room, over every shop; they covered cups, garments, furniture, rings; wherever possible space was found, it was filled with a picture of Christ, our Lady, or a Saint”.(1) The Church officially fought abuses of image-worship, but certain fanatics in the East began a violent reaction against all effigies. In the middle of the eighth century, the Iconoclasts, or “image-breakers,” began a drive to wipe out all images.

In a violent persecution of those who followed the traditional doctrine, monasteries and churches were destroyed, sacred statues smashed, relics of the saints desecrated, priests and monks brutally murdered. The Church’s doctrine had always been clear, and the Second Council of Nicea in 787 made explicit once and for all the principles governing the use of images. The practice of veneration of images, however, awaited the Summa of St Thomas Aquinas to find its place within the total synthesis of Catholic doctrine and, consequently, to find its own fullest explanation. St. Thomas treats of two kinds of worship: *latria*, the homage due to God alone, and *dulia*, the honor or homage due to distinguished persons.

Iconoclast disorders continued up until the ninth century. Some violent followers of the Protestant Revolt of the sixteenth century repeated the excesses of the Iconoclast age. An English royal decree of 1548 ordered that all crucifixes and sacred statues be taken down and that the royal arms of the Lion and Unicorn be put up in their place.

What was the teaching of the Second Council of Nicea on the proper use of images? In what council was this teaching affirmed? What purposes are images intended to serve, as shown by the blessing?

The Council of Nicea declared: “We decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honored and life-giving cross, the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or 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 savior, 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. Certainly this is not the full adoration in accordance with our faith, which is properly paid to the divine nature, but it also resembles that given to the figure of the honored and life-giving cross, and also to

the holy books of the gospels and to other sacred cult objects. Further, people are drawn to honor these images with the offering of incense and lights, as was piously established by ancient custom. Indeed, the honor paid to an image traverses it, reaching the model;(2) and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in the image.”(3)

The blessing of images clearly shows the purposes they are to serve. The blessing says: “Almighty, everlasting God, you do not forbid us to represent your saints in stone or paint, so that, as often as we look upon their likeness with the eyes of the body, we may with the eyes of the mind meditate upon their holiness and be led to imitate their deeds. In your kindness, we beg you to bless and sanctify this picture (statue), meant to honor and call to mind your only-begotten Son, (or the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, or Blessed N., your apostle, or martyr, or bishop, or confessor, or virgin). May all who in its presence humbly strive to serve honor your only-begotten Son, (or the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, or Blessed N., your apostle, or martyr, or bishop, or confessor, or virgin). By his (her) merits and intercession gain from you grace in the present life and eternal glory in the life to come. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.”

How has the Catholic Church been “the mother of the arts”? What are some examples of great religious art? What is the history of religious art since the Protestant revolt?