

mistake when they demolished statues, destroyed paintings, and exiled beauty from our churches.

“They have reduced them to buildings with four plain walls and an empty pulpit, thus identifying religion with drab ugliness. I hope that it will not be long until we return to the authentic Christian viewpoint which prevailed up to the Reformation, and which regards all beauty as mirroring the God of beauty, holiness and love. Art should be the handmaid of religion, achieving its highest purpose when it lifts the mind of the creature to the contemplation of the Eternal.” To make art the handmaid of religion is the reason why the Catholic Church has images, statues and paintings in her churches, monasteries and schools.

What about the use of relics? Contrary to the impression of many non-Catholics, the Church does not ascribe any magical virtue or curative powers to the relic itself: she merely states, in accordance with the Scriptures, that relics are sometimes the occasion of God’s miracles. The Scriptures record the incident of a woman who was cured by touching the hem of our Lord’s garments, of the sick healed by the shadow of St Peter, and of the handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched the body of St Paul.

The reverence for Christian relics is as old as Christianity itself. Back in the second century we find that the disciples of Polycarp, who had been burned at the

stake “took up his bones, which were more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place where the Lord allows us to assemble in gladness and joy to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom”. Writing in the fourth century, St Jerome thus refutes the charge of idolatry or “cinder-worshipping”: “We do not worship, we do not adore, we do not bow down before the creature rather than to the Creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore Him whose martyrs they are.”

The spirit that prompts a son to treasure carefully a lock of his mother’s hair, and moves people to lay wreaths on the tombstone has ever prompted the Christian people to venerate the relics of the saints of God. Failure to do so would indicate a lack of respect not only for the saints but also for almighty God whose faithful servants they were and on account of whom we honor them.

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Images, Statues, and Relics

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Why do Catholics have Images, Statues and Relics in their churches and even pray before them?

The Catholic Church condemns the worship of images as idolatry, but she sanctions reverence for the pictures and images of Christ and the saints. She does this not because of the material of which they are composed, but because of what they represent. The notion that a Catholic worships a crucifix or an image of Christ is too absurd for serious refutation.

Let a traveler ask the humblest Catholic peasant kneeling before a wayside shrine of the crucified Christ if he worships the image itself and he will answer that worship is due to God alone. He merely venerates or reverences the crucifix because it represents his Savior dying upon the Cross.

The children’s catechism states explicitly: “We should give to relics, crucifixes, and holy pictures an inferior and relative honor, so far as they relate to Christ and His saints, and are memorials of them. We may not pray to relics or images, for they can neither see, nor hear, nor help us.” In other words it is strictly forbidden to pray to a statue or a picture.

The use that Catholics make of

images is therefore precisely the same as civilized nations make of statues and likenesses of their great statesmen and heroes. Where is the city of any considerable size in the world which has not erected effigies of the nation's heroes and benefactors? Walk through the streets of Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Rome and thousands of other cities, and you will see numerous monuments erected to their illustrious men, seeking thus to honor them and to enshrine them in the abiding memory of their citizens.

Do we denounce this practice as the worshipping of images and accuse those nations of idolatry? To ask the question is to answer it. Then why should any person feel misgivings when he sees the figure of Christ or of His blessed mother or of the saints in a Catholic church? They are there to increase the devotion of the faithful, to arouse in them holy sentiments and aspirations and to remind the faithful to imitate their examples of virtue and holiness of life.

The early Christians adorned their catacombs with frescoes of Christ, and of scenes from the Holy Scriptures. Among the most common were Moses striking the rock, Daniel in the lion's den, the birth of Christ, the coming of the Wise Men, the marriage feast of Cana, the rising of Lazarus, and Christ the Good Shepherd. Statues were uncommon only because they were costly and difficult to make. When the Church emerged from the catacombs, however, she at once

proceeded to decorate her churches with mosaics, paintings and sculptures.

It was not until the eighth century that a campaign was waged against images by Leo the Isaurian, Emperor of Constantinople, who ordered the paintings of Christ and His saints be torn from the church walls and burned. Invading even the homes of people, he confiscated their sacred images, causing all images of bronze, silver and gold to be melted down and converted into coins, upon which he had his own image stamped. Like Henry VIII and Cromwell, he pretended to be moved by a zeal for purity of worship, while avarice was the real motive.

The warfare was continued by Constantine Copronymous, his successor. On one occasion, Stephen, an intrepid monk, held before the emperor a coin bearing that tyrant's image, and asked: "Sire, whose image is this?"

"It is mine," answered the emperor.

Whereupon the monk threw down the coin and trampled on it. He was seized by the royal attendants and condemned to death.

"Alas!" cried the holy religious to the emperor, "if I am punished for dishonoring the image of a mortal monarch, what punishment do they deserve who burn the image of Jesus Christ?"

The destruction of images was

revived by Luther and the other reformers of the sixteenth century. The churches and monasteries were the great museums of the art of the Middle Ages. Many priceless paintings and statues were demolished, frescoed walls were whitewashed; gorgeous stained glass windows with figures of Christ and the saints were ruthlessly smashed. The iconoclastic campaign was especially vehement in Germany, Holland and the British Isles. A traveler to these countries, visiting some of the desecrated Catholic churches which are now being used as Protestant houses of worship can scarcely fail to note the mutilated statues of Christ and the saints still standing in their niches.

They stand as grim reminders of a barbarous and fanatical warfare against religious memorials, which was not only a grievous sacrilege but an outrage against the fine arts as well. If the senseless outbursts had extended into Italy, France, and Spain, some of the most priceless treasures of art would have been lost forever to the human race. After visiting the newly-erected Catholic chapel at the University of Illinois, Professor Chauncey Baldwin, a noted English scholar, made the following significant observation: "I was born of Protestant parents and brought up in a town in New England where something of the puritanical spirit of the colonists still held sway. I may be said to be, therefore, a dyed-in-the-wool Protestant; but I can see now that the reformers of the sixteenth century made a great