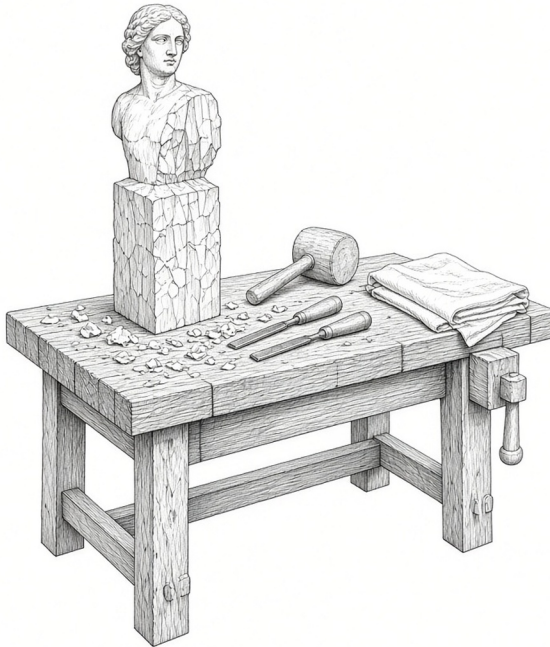




SILENT HOMILIES

The Face They Keep

*Statues, and the honour
that is not worship*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



The Face They Keep

Statues, and the honour that is not worship

Before You Begin



Someone asks, after Mass: “Father, why do Catholics have statues if the Bible says not to make graven images?” That is a fair question. The short answer is that the Church makes a clear distinction between worshipping God and honouring someone represented by an image.

Worship belongs to God alone. A statue of a saint is not treated as a god. It is a visible reminder of a person whom the Church believes is alive with God. The honour given to the image is meant to pass through to the person it shows.

This little book is not a defence of bad taste, and it is not a catalogue of famous shrines. It walks through what the Church actually said when images were on trial: the Incarnation, St John Damascene, the Second Council of Nicaea, the empty niches in English churches, the veiling of statues in Passiontide, and the worn bronze foot of St Peter in Rome.

Read it if you have ever wondered whether a genuflection toward a figure breaks the commandment. Read it if you have only ever heard statues spoken of as a Catholic embarrassment.

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Chapter 1

Not a god on a shelf



The first argument is often a photograph. A woman kissing the foot of a statue. A man lighting a candle. Then someone quotes the commandment about graven images, and the conversation ends before it has begun. The commandment is real. So is the Church's answer.

Israel was forbidden to make a likeness of the unseen God and then bow to that likeness as if it were Him. That ban still stands. No Catholic statue is permitted to be treated as a deity. The moment a figure is used as a charm or a spare god, it has stopped being Catholic, whatever the label on the base says.

The Old Testament did not ban every religious image. God commanded cherubim over the Ark. The Temple had carved and woven imagery. In Numbers, Moses was told to make a bronze serpent so that those who looked at it might live. Later, when people began burning incense to that same serpent as if it were a god, King Hezekiah destroyed it. An image can be legitimate. It can also be misused. The answer to misuse is not that every image was always wrong.

We already live by a similar distinction. A soldier salutes a flag and does not think the cloth is the country. A child kisses a photograph of a grandmother and does not think the paper can cook dinner. Honour travels through signs. The question is whether this particular sign has been asked to be a god.

A statue in a Catholic church is a sign of a person. If the person is Christ, the image points to the One who is worshipped. If the person is a

saint, the image points to a friend of God who is honoured, not adored. The Greek and Latin terms can wait for a later page. The English is enough: God alone is worshipped.

A Small Reflection

Why do human beings need visible signs at all? We kiss photographs. We keep wedding rings. We tend graves. We stand for flags. We are not just minds. We pray with our bodies as well. We kneel, stand, touch, kiss and look. The danger comes when we forget what the sign points to. Some Christians have been taught from childhood that religious images are dangerous. That fear deserves a patient answer, not a sneer. The Church's answer is older than the argument: worship God; honour the saints; let an image remain an image.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep our honour honest, and our worship for You alone. Amen.

Chapter 2

When God took a face



In the Old Testament God could not be represented as though He were one more visible creature among others. He had not given Himself a human face. The ban on making an image of God was tied to that truth.

In Christ, God truly became man. Jesus had a real human face, real hands, a real death and a real rising. The Word became flesh. Once that is believed, the argument about images changes. Christians are not only a people of ideas. They are a people of a Person who could be seen, touched and heard.

The early Church painted Christ and the saints in the catacombs. Those paintings were not a later luxury. They were already saying that the Incarnation had made a difference. If God has taken a human nature, then depicting the human face of Christ is not the same act as inventing a statue of an unseen God.

That does not make every image wise. It does mean that the Christian defence of images became, at its best, a defence of the Incarnation. In the old iconoclastic arguments, refusing every image of Christ could sound as if His humanity were being set aside. That was a particular historical debate. It is not a charge against every Christian community that prefers not to use statues.

A Small Reflection

Christianity can become embarrassed by matter. We like clean ideas. We like prayers that stay in the head. Then we remember baptismal water, oil on the forehead, bread and wine, a hand on a dying person's head. The faith is not trying to escape creation. The Word became flesh. If that is true, it is not surprising that Christians have wanted to keep images of Christ and the saints. It would be odd if the Church spoke of the Incarnation and then treated every visible reminder as a threat.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus, who took our flesh, keep us from being ashamed of the world
You entered. Amen.*

Chapter 3

The monk who would not despise matter



In the eighth century, emperors in Constantinople ordered holy images destroyed. The quarrel is called iconoclasm: the breaking of images. One of the strongest voices against it came from a monk who did not even live inside the empire. St John of Damascus, often called St John Damascene, wrote from a city under Muslim rule. That distance gave him room to speak.

His argument was simple and deep. We do not make an image of the invisible God as if He were a creature. We do depict Christ, because Christ has a human nature that can be seen. To refuse that image can become a way of refusing the Incarnation.

He also used a principle already associated with St Basil: the honour given to an image passes to the one it represents. You are not honouring paint as paint. You are honouring the person shown. John Damascene would not despise matter, because God had used matter for our salvation. Water, bread, wine, oil, wood and colour were not the enemy.

A Small Reflection

Why did a monk defend matter so strongly? Because Christians do not believe salvation means escaping creation. Water baptises. Bread and wine become sacramental signs. Oil is used. Hands are laid. A cross is kissed. Catholic worship is full of matter. The sacraments use material things in a unique way. Sacred images do something much more modest: they help human memory and devotion. A statue is not a sacrament. It still belongs in a Church that takes the body seriously.

A Short Prayer

St John Damascene, pray for us. Amen.

Chapter 4

What Nicaea actually said



An ecumenical council is a gathering of bishops whose teaching, when received by the Church, has authority for the whole Catholic Church. The Seventh Ecumenical Council met at Nicaea in 787. It is often called Nicaea II. Empress Irene supported it. The bishops were answering iconoclasm.

The council taught that images of Christ, of Our Lady, of angels and of saints may be set up and honoured. It also taught that worship, in the strict sense, belongs to God alone. The honour given to an image is a relative honour. It does not stop at the wood or the paint. It passes to the person represented.

The council compared the honour given to an image with the honour given to the Gospel book or to the Cross. That comparison is useful. Nobody thinks the leather cover of a lectionary is God. People still kiss it. The gesture is about what the book carries.

Later Latin theology used three words that many Catholics still find useful. *Latria* is the worship owed to God alone. *Dulia* is the honour given to the saints. *Hyperdulia* is the special honour given to Mary because of her unique place in salvation. Nicaea II did not itself lay out that later threefold vocabulary. It did teach the distinction that matters: worship belongs to God alone; the honour given to an image passes to the person shown. After that, ordinary English is better.

A Small Reflection

Why does the Church sometimes need a council to defend something ordinary people had already been doing? Councils do not simply create beliefs from nothing. Often a controversy forces the Church to explain more precisely what Christians already believe and practise. Families had kept images. Churches had painted walls. Then emperors said the walls should be empty. Nicaea II said, with authority, what that memory was allowed to mean, and what it was never allowed to mean.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give Your Church clarity when a good practice is attacked, and humility when a practice has gone wrong. Amen.

Chapter 5

Why the West stood the saints up



The Eastern Churches kept, and still keep, the painted icon as their ordinary sacred image. The Western Church kept icons too, but it also became comfortable with statues: images that stand in three dimensions. That is a difference of habit, not a difference of faith about worship.

It is not true that the East hates statues, or that the West abandoned the icon. Both traditions honour images because of the persons they show. Both reject the worship of the object itself.

In the medieval West the church building filled with visible Christian memory. Romanesque porches carried carved stories. Gothic churches lifted saints into niches. Over the screen at the entrance to the sanctuary there was often a rood: Christ on the Cross, with Mary and John beside Him. When people entered a medieval church, the images around them reminded them of Christ, the saints and the stories of the faith.

The basic purpose is the same as an icon. The image reminds us of the person represented. In the Western Church that image was often made so that it could stand in the room.

A Small Reflection

A church that keeps faces in the corners is making a claim about memory. These people are not only in books. They belong to the same communion as the living. That can be done with paint. It can be done with wood or stone. The material is not the doctrine. The doctrine is that Christ has a human face, and that His friends are not lost. When a Western parish puts St Joseph near the side aisle, it is not trying to compete with the iconostasis. It is doing, in its own language, the same act of remembrance.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, make our churches places of memory, not warehouses of decoration.
Amen.*

Chapter 6

The niches that still show the blow



In many English churches the niches are empty. The faces are gone. Sometimes a stone still shows where a chisel went in. Ely, and churches like it, keep that scar. At Walsingham the medieval shrine was destroyed. The loss was not only art. Once statues, glass and carvings were destroyed, much of that religious memory was simply gone.

The Reformation argument was not invented out of nothing. There was real superstition. Images were sometimes treated as if the object itself had power. Reformers who feared that were not all vandals. Some thought they were protecting the commandment.

The Catholic question is harder than choosing a side in a culture war. What should the Church do when a legitimate devotion becomes distorted? Destroying everything is one answer. Leaving abuse untouched because it is traditional is another. Neither is wise. Correction is not the same as erasure. Memory is not the same as magic.

A Small Reflection

What happens when fear of superstition becomes fear of memory itself? Reform can become destruction. Tradition can also become abuse. The harder Catholic answer is to do both things: correct a devotion when it has gone wrong, but do not destroy everything simply because abuse is possible. In trying to remove superstition, Christians can sometimes remove legitimate Christian memory as well. An empty niche can remind us of that.

A Short Prayer

Lord, teach us to correct what is false without erasing what was true.

Amen.

Chapter 7

The weeks when the faces are hidden



For most of the year the Church shows her images. In Passiontide she hides some of them. In the older Roman practice, from the Fifth Sunday of Lent, crosses and statues were veiled in violet. Crosses were uncovered after the liturgy of Good Friday. Statues waited until the Easter Vigil. The present Roman Missal still allows the covering of crosses and images from the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Local practice varies, including in England and Wales. It is not an American custom imported by accident. It is an old Roman habit that some parishes still keep.

When crosses and statues are veiled, the saints are covered too. Their holiness comes from Christ, so the Church lets even their images disappear for a short time. The point is not to pretend the saints have gone away. The point is to let the Passion occupy the room.

This is not the same thing as the humeral veil. At Benediction the priest normally uses that vestment when he holds the monstrance for the blessing. It covers his shoulders and hands because of reverence for the Blessed Sacrament. It is not used to hide an image, and it is not used every time a priest touches the Sacrament.

A Small Reflection

The Church spends most of the year showing holy images. Then, for a short time, she hides them. Why? Sometimes absence teaches us what constant presence no longer can. We can walk past a statue for eleven months and stop seeing it. Then the cloth goes up, and we notice the empty space. Passiontide is not an argument against images. It is a reminder that even good reminders can become furniture. The veiling is temporary because Easter will uncover the Cross again.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, when our eyes grow used to holy things, teach us to see them again. Amen.

Chapter 8

Honour that passes through



St Thomas Aquinas put the old teaching into careful order. The honour given to an image is not given to the wood as wood. It passes to the person represented. If the image is of Christ, the worship owed to Christ is not owed to the statue. The statue is a means of attention. Thomas is explaining doctrine here. His wording is not itself a new definition. The definition is older: God alone is worshipped.

That is why Catholics bow, kiss an image, light a candle or put flowers before a statue. The gesture itself does not decide the meaning. Context and intention do. A kiss given to a grandmother's photograph is love. A kiss given as if an object were a god would be idolatry. Teaching matters, because a gesture without explanation is easily misunderstood.

An image is not a relic. A relic has a physical connection with a saint or a sacred event: a bone, a piece of clothing, a fragment of the Cross. A statue or icon represents someone. Confusing the two makes the statue seem more than it is, or the relic less. Both can be honoured. They are not the same kind of thing.

A Small Reflection

We are bodily people, and visible reminders can help us remember those who have gone before us in faith. The saints do not need statues. Sacred images are there to help us remember them and turn our minds towards God. That is not an insult to the saint. It is an honest account of us. Prayer can happen in an empty room. Most of us, most of the time, are helped by something the eye can find. The problem begins when we forget that the image is supposed to lead our attention beyond the object itself.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, when we light a candle or bow before an image, keep our minds on
You, or on the saint we meant to honour. Amen.*

Chapter 9

Toes, cloth and living hands



In St Peter's Basilica there is a bronze statue of the apostle, long associated with the medieval sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio. The right foot is worn smooth. Generations have touched or kissed it. Nobody can date every touch. The wear is simply there. Repeated devotion leaves a mark.

Processional statues still matter in Spain, Italy, Poland, Latin America and elsewhere. A parish carries a figure through the street because the person represented is being honoured in public. The wood is moving. The honour is aimed beyond the wood.

Black Madonnas are often mentioned in the same breath as statues. They are not all one story. Some images darkened with age, smoke or varnish. Some were made dark. Częstochowa, which many people think of first, is a painting, not a statue. It is better not to force every dark Madonna into a single explanation.

An inexpensive statue may be spiritually useful if it genuinely helps someone remember St Joseph and pray. A masterpiece may do the same. The question is not the price of the plaster. The question is whether anyone still knows who is being shown.

A Small Reflection

The worn bronze is interesting because thousands of physical gestures have left a mark. What does repeated devotion do to a place? A church building carries traces of people who prayed before us. Not all memory is written in registers. Some of it is visible in stone, wood and metal. That can become superstition if we start treating the worn place as magic. It can also become gratitude: other people stood here, and they were honouring the same apostle.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless the hands that have prayed before us, and keep us from turning their traces into charms. Amen.

Chapter 10

What a statue is not allowed to do



Canon law is brief and sensible. Sacred images are to be kept in churches for the veneration of the faithful. They should be in moderate number and suitable order. The phrase is worth sitting with. The Church does not only ask whether an image is allowed. She also asks whether the arrangement helps or confuses.

The Council of Trent said the same in another century. Images are to be retained. The honour given to them is referred to the prototypes. Superstition is to be removed. Images are not to replace the sacraments. The Eucharist is the centre of Catholic worship. The tabernacle is not in the same architectural place in every church, but the Mass remains the centre of the room's purpose. A church can be full of statues and still lose that centre if people no longer know where to look when they come to worship.

Devotion becomes distorted if a person begins treating an image as though a particular object mechanically guarantees a favour. That is not Catholic trust. It is using a holy thing as if it were a tool that cannot fail. Teaching should prevent that without sneering at simple prayer.

Taste is not theology. A simple village church and a richly decorated shrine can both be Catholic. The question is whether the images support worship and devotion, not whether the walls match one person's preference for less clutter.

A Small Reflection

“Moderate number and suitable order” is a fascinating Catholic phrase. The Church does not only ask whether a devotion is allowed. She also asks whether it is ordered, whether it helps, and whether it confuses. Catholicism is not only about having more sacred objects. Sometimes wisdom means knowing when enough is enough. That is not a preference for empty rooms. It is a way of keeping the church’s purpose clear.

A Short Prayer

Lord, order our churches so that nothing crowds You out. Amen.

Chapter 11

Blessing an image, and letting one go



The Church has a rite for blessing images of Our Lord, Our Lady and the saints. The Book of Blessings sets an image apart for sacred use. The blessing does not change the chemistry of the paint. It does not turn a statue into a relic. It does not make the object work like a sacrament. It places the image in the Church's prayer, so that it is no longer only decoration.

A damaged blessed image should be treated respectfully. The Church does not give one universal procedure for every object in every country. If the image can be repaired or passed to someone who can use it, that may be appropriate. If it is beyond use and you are unsure what to do, ask your parish priest. Do not throw it carelessly into ordinary rubbish.

The saint is not harmed when a damaged statue has to be removed. The image existed to help us.

A Small Reflection

What changes when an object is blessed? Not its chemistry. Not its artistic quality. The change is in its purpose and its relationship to prayer. The Church blesses material things and sets some of them aside for religious use. Blessing an image belongs to that habit. It is a way of saying that this object now serves memory and prayer, and should be handled as if that were true, including on the day it can no longer be used.

A Short Prayer

Lord, teach us to treat holy things with care, and never to confuse the thing with You. Amen.

Chapter 12

Living with images



How should an ordinary Catholic actually relate to statues and sacred images? It helps to know who the image represents. If nobody in the parish even knows which saint a statue represents, then we should probably ask whether the image is still doing what it was put there to do. Children can be taught that the statue is not the person, and that God alone is worshipped. Candles and flowers belong with prayer, not with payment.

Images should not be treated as lucky objects. They are meant to lead toward Mass, Confession and ordinary prayer, not away from them. There is nothing especially Catholic about having a large number of religious objects if they have simply become decoration.

The Church has spent a long time holding two truths together. Images can help. Images can be misused. Neither truth cancels the other.

A Small Reflection

The practical test is simple, and it is not about taste. Does this image help you remember Christ, His Mother or His friends? Does it take you toward prayer, or does it sit there as a charm? A parish can answer those questions without becoming severe and without becoming careless. Living with images means living with memory. It also means keeping the altar in the middle of the room.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, keep our devotion centred on You, and teach us to honour Your saints without confusing honour with worship. Amen.

A Last Word



Catholics do not worship statues. The Church keeps images because Christianity is rooted in the Incarnation and in the communion of saints. Images can help. Images can also be misused. The Church has spent centuries trying to hold both truths together.

We began with the commandment against idols. That commandment still matters. So does the Incarnation. A monk who would not despise matter is still useful. So is an empty English niche, a veiled statue in Passiontide, and a worn bronze foot in Rome.

St John Damascene, pray for us.

All holy men and women, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading



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On the bronze statue of St Peter in the Vatican Basilica: standard Vatican and art-historical accounts associated with Arnolfo di Cambio.

A word of thanks



Silent Homilies is offered freely, so that anyone can read these books without a charge.

Preparing each Little Treasure, however, takes many hours of research, writing, checking sources, editing and design, as well as the resources needed to keep the project going.

If this booklet has been useful to you and you are able to support Silent Homilies, your gift would be received with real gratitude. It will help me continue researching, writing and making future books freely available to readers.

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