

Family Portraits

Statues and Religious Art

Why do Catholics have art in their churches?

Our churches often have depictions of Jesus, angels, saints, and Bible scenes. Such art goes all the way back to the earliest centuries, when persecuted Christians created frescoes of Jesus and religious scenes in the catacombs. Historically, art has been an important way to teach the faith to those who are unable to read, in much the same way as children's Bibles today often contain pictures. Art also adds beauty to our worship and serves as holy reminders of heavenly realities.

How can works of art be holy reminders?

Think of how our national monuments feature statues or portraits of American heroes. Standing before Lincoln's statue at the Lincoln Memorial, we are inspired to fight for truth as he did. Similarly, when Catholics stand before a crucifix depicting the death of Jesus, we remember the tremendous love with which Jesus gave his life for us. Religious art helps us turn our heart and mind towards God.

Are Catholics worshipping the statues?

No, Catholics do not worship statues or any other works of art, any more than visitors to the Lincoln Memorial are worshipping "Honest Abe." We only worship the blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are well aware that a crucifix is simply a hunk of plaster and wood, for example, and not really Jesus himself. When we pray in front of a crucifix, we are not worshipping it, but praying to Jesus whom we cannot see.

Why have statues of people besides Jesus?

As we explained in our previous message, Catholics see the saints as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as people often have portraits of family members in their homes, Catholics often have images of the saints in our churches, since they are part of our spiritual family. Their lives inspire us in our love for Jesus. When we see an image of Saint Paul, for example, we are inspired to preach the Gospel courageously as he did.

Didn't God forbid statues and images?

When God gave the Ten Commandments, he was not forbidding the creation of all religious art, but rather the creation of idols of false gods. (Exodus 20:3-6) The Israelites were not to create such idols like their pagan neighbors, for God is the only true God and they must worship him alone. On many occasions, however, God does command his people to create statues and other art for use in worship.

What are examples of God commanding images to be made?

God commanded Moses to create a bronze serpent for the healing of the Israelites. (Numbers 21:4-9) He ordered that golden angels be made to adorn the Ark of the Covenant. (Exodus 25:17-22) By God's command, the Temple in Jerusalem was full of sacred art, including enormous statues of angels, as well as carved images of palm trees, flowers, lions and oxen. (1 Kings 6-7) Such examples show that God does not prohibit all religious art, but only the worship of false gods. It is proper for Christians to use nativity scenes, illustrated Bibles, crosses, and other works of art to help draw us closer to him.

