

“It All Leads To Idolatry”

By Greg Witherow

Two distinctives of the Catholic faith include prayers to the Saints and the use of sacramentals¹. While all baptized Christians are saints², the Saints in heaven are in a glorified state. Scripture states, “The prayers of a righteous man availeth much”. Because of this, Catholics look to the believers in heaven as effective prayer warriors who intercede on our behalf. Another aid for the Catholic is the sacramental. Sacramentals include blessings (of persons, meals, objects, places), holy water (which recalls baptism) and devotion to Saints (wearing of scapulars or medals of Saints). A sacramental does not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit - but like Christian books, the folding of hands in prayer, singing man-written hymns or observing special days (such as Christmas, Easter or for Protestants - Reformation Day), these tools prepare the soul to receive grace. Yet Protestants reject these Catholic devotions for one reason: Idolatry.

A Protestant articulation that opposes such practices is as follows. **Such practices detract from Christ and lead Catholics into idolatry.** The Protestant *might* concede the Catholic Church condemns the worship of Saints. But they would counter charge that *in fact* millions of Catholics engage in Mary worship (in their opinion). They would further charge the use of sacramentals is often superstitious, with many Catholics putting hope in such objects to bring them good fortune. Protestants maintain “the plain simple teaching of the Bible” would lift Catholics out of idolatry and re-center them on Christ. This is a fair appraisal of the Protestant mindset. It will be demonstrated here such Catholic practices are based on Biblical principles. We will first examine sacramentals.

The Use of Religious Objects

It is a fact that God has used physical objects as instruments to work grace. In the book of Acts people were healed when touching handkerchiefs belonging to Paul and when Peter’s shadow passed over them. Christ’s garment cured a woman from bleeding. Waters stirred by an angel healed the crippled. Mud mixed with spit restored a man’s sight. Viewing a bronze snake on a pole healed the Israelites. A fleece gave Gideon his signal from God. An ephod was used to determine God’s will. A burning bush got the attention of Moses. The staff of Moses defeated Egypt, parted the Red Sea and made water flow from a rock. Moses’s raised arms defeated an army (lowering them, the Israelites began to lose). A talking donkey corrected Balaam. Samson’s hair gave him strength. A fig paste healed Hezekiah. A shadow told him it would be so. Elijah’s mantle parted the Jordan River. Elisha used salt to make water pure, a stick to make an axe float, water to heal leprosy and flour to take poison out of a stew. Elisha’s bones (the relic of a saint) raised the dead. Statues of angels (on the Ark) were used in the Tabernacle and Temple. Did these objects work magic? No. Instead each object prepared the recipient to receive grace *by building faith*. **This is the exact principle behind a sacramental**³. The Church mimics God by acting on this Biblical standard.

¹ A sacramental is not to be confused with a Sacrament.

² While all Christians are saints (see the Catechism 946-962), Catholics have devotions to Saints in heaven.

³ See the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1670.

The Misuse of Religious Objects

But wasn't God risking superstitious beliefs using such tactics? It would seem a direct miracle from God, minus the objects, would have centered the people's attention more clearly on God alone. (This is the Protestant principle we're addressing here). As a matter of record, some of these objects were later used in idolatrous ways. All Israel played the harlot after Gideon's ephod in the city of Ophrah. Samson believed in his hair rather than God - and fell at the hand of the Philistines. The bronze snake used to bring healing was later placed in the Temple and became an object of worship. The Ark of the Covenant was used as a good luck charm to give a military success. The Temple itself was profaned and became a cesspool of idolatrous practices.

And other extra-Biblical abuses abound. The Bible is meant to lead people into Truth. But the Bible is the most misused book in the history of Man. It has been *falsely* used to justify homosexuality, remarriage after divorce, greed (idolatry), legalism, racism, polygamy⁴, apocalyptic cults, unjust wars and other errors. Likewise, God ordained marriage to be holy. But sex has proven to be a powerful vice. Today sexual vices are nearly virtues. Millions of people are in bondage to pornography, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, prostitution and other sexual corruptions, decimating many souls.

But abuses are not proof of error. Therefore, God insists on using rites and objects to work grace. In doing so He demonstrates He is Lord of all - redeeming Man's soul, body and the Creation itself. Christ instituted water for baptism, bread and wine in the Eucharist, oil in healing and the laying on of hands to ordain. And rather than speaking directly into our ears, God ordained men to use ink and parchment to write his commands and pass them on in the teaching authority of the Church. God established bishops and presbyters to have authority (to bind and loose) and minister with deacons in the Church. Such things do not represent a barrier, blocking direct access to God by the Christian (as some argue). Instead these things show God redeeming Creation (man and the elements) for holy ends. We are not called to be Gnostics⁵; we are called to be Christians.

The Exaltation of Saints

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews exalts several Old Testament saints worthy of imitation. The Church acts on this principle by injecting the lives of Saints into the liturgy. There are two motives for this. First, we are called to imitate the holiness of such people. Second, the Saints in heaven can impact events on earth. This latter point we must prove.

The Saints Involvement in Earthly Events

There are places in the Bible where we see the Saints in heaven involved in earthly events. At the Transfiguration Elijah and Moses speak to Christ of his coming Passion.

⁴ Luther was approach by a German prince (Philip, Landgrave of Hesse Cassel) for permission to marry a second wife while his first wife, Margaret of Savoy, was still living. Luther summoned a synod of six of the principal reformers--Melancthon and Bucer among them--who decided, "the Bible nowhere condemns polygamy". The marriage was ruled legitimate. See <http://www.sacred-texts.com/wmn/wcs/wcs09.htm>

⁵ Gnosticism believes that the physical world is bad (corrupting) while only the spiritual realm is good.

Notice it is Elijah and Moses who do the talking, not Christ. We can note two things. First, these men are fully aware of Christ's mission. Second, their words can only strengthen Christ's resolve. As the angels in the desert and later the Garden, Moses and Elijah encourage Christ's push to the Cross. In Revelation we see the Saints involved.

“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw **under the altar the souls** of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?’⁶” (Note: Their request will be answered.)

The following illustrates (1) the Saints in heaven witness our pilgrimage, (2) remain in communion with us and (3) present our prayers to God, which impacts earthly events.

“Therefore, **since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.⁷” (Note: The cloud of witnesses are the Saints in heaven)

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, **and to the spirits of just men made perfect**, and to Jesus.⁸” (Note: We have access to *everyone* on this list)

“And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, **which are the prayers of the saints**.⁹” (Note: The Saints have the prayers, not God)

Saint Augustine

“A Christian people celebrates together in religious solemnity the memorials of the martyrs, both to encourage their being imitated and so that it can share in their merits and be **aided by their prayers**” (*Against Faustus the Manichean* [A.D. 400])

Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Catechism condemns superstitious practices, worship of idols, conjuring up the dead, magic and sorcery; things the Church is accused of teaching or encouraging.

Paragraph 2111: Superstition is the deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes. It can even affect the worship we offer the true God, e.g., when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. **To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere**

⁶ Revelation 6:9 As a side note this is why Catholics put relics of Saints in our altars

⁷ Hebrews 12:1

⁸ Hebrews 12:22-24

⁹ Revelation 5:8

external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition.

Paragraph 2113: Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, Satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc. Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” Many martyrs died for not adoring ‘the Beast’ refusing even to simulate such worship. Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God.

Paragraph 2116: **All forms of divination are to be rejected**: recourse to Satan or demons, **conjuring up the dead** or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.

Paragraph 2117: All practices of *magic* or *sorcery*, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others - even if this were for the sake of restoring their health - are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion. These practices are even more to be condemned when accompanied by the intention of harming someone, or when they have recourse to the intervention of demons. Wearing charms is also reprehensible. *Spiritism* often implies divination or magical practices; the Church for her part warns the faithful against it. Recourse to so-called traditional cures does not justify either the invocation of evil powers or the exploitation of another's credulity

Conclusion

Paul writes, “**I urge you then**, be imitators of **me**”. Paul is not blurring the centrality of Christ. He’s leading us to Christ. Statues, icons, scapulars, medals and relics remind us of Saints (like Paul) who escort us to our Lord. If we can sing man-made songs to aid us in worship, can we not create man-made sacramentals¹⁰ to help us to pray and love? Is not the principle the same? And if a young poet can tell his bride, “I love you more than all creation”, cannot the Christian poet tell Christ’s mother, “I love you more than all creation”? Is hyperbole forbidden? Must poetic license always be labeled heresy? We ask others to pray for us. In doing so we do not worship the Christian nor negate Christ as the sole mediator. Can we not therefore utter the same request to a Saint in heaven (using the same principle), knowing they somehow receive them (per the above passage)?

Man can corrupt anything, whether it is Saints, sacramentals or the Bible itself. But the Church must be measured by Her teachings, not by the corruption of those teachings.

¹⁰ Mary directed the creation of the Rosary, Miraculous Medal and the scapular in visions. While they are man-made, not all sacramentals are man-inspired.