**Sacred Art: Statues**

In the giving of the Law, God instructs the Israelites: “You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no graven image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land, to bow down to them; for I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 26:1). Often, this passage is used to critique the Catholic practice of venerating statues, in churches and in homes.

It is important to note, however, that the criticism is misguided in three regards:

1. “God forbade the *worship* *of* statues, but he did not forbid the *religious use* of statues. Instead, he actually *commanded* their use in religious contexts!” (“Do Catholics Worship Statues?”, *Catholic Answers*, catholic.com).  Even in the Old Testament, God instructs the Israelites to construct statues for various religious purposes: for example, see Exodus 25, 1 Chronicles 28, and Ezekiel 41, where God instructs the Israelites to carve statues of angels. Also, consider God’s command to Moses to construct a bronze serpent for the purpose of healing the Israelites bitten by serpents (Numbers 21). The command also says not to “bow down to them.” Does this contradict the Catholic practice of bowing or kneeling before a statue? No: “Though bowing can be used as a posture in worship, not all bowing is worship. In Japan, people show respect by bowing in greeting (the equivalent of the Western handshake). Similarly, a person can kneel before a king without worshipping him as a god. In the same way, a Catholic who may kneel in front of a statue while praying isn’t worshipping the statue or even praying to *it*” (ibid.).
2. As with our previous sections on icons and stained glass, it is important to recall that the Incarnation powerfully influences our use of sacred images. Art “incarnates” spiritual realities which are often unseen. At Mass, we are literally surrounded by the angels and saints, partaking with them in the heavenly liturgy, the unending worship of God. To depict this figures in our churches in statues is a vivid reminder of this reality. Since we are human beings, both body and soul, physical images help to turn our minds to these realities that go beyond our senses.
3. Again, as with icons, stained glass, or other religious images, we are not praying *to* the image itself. The statue (or other image) offers a physical representation of Christ, Mary, an angel, or one of the saints; it is to these persons that we pray – either *praying to Christ* (who is God), or asking the intercession of the angels and saints (that they will *pray for us*).

There is more (much more) to reality than what can be seen with our eyes. Various sacred images remind us of this truth in a very concrete way.