

27. THE LIE BELIEVED (2). IMAGE WORSHIP AND RELICS

When a father or mother, brother or sister, or another beloved relative dies, then we like to have a picture of them. I imagine that in most homes, there are photos of parents or grandparents somewhere in a prominent place. Is there something wrong with that? No, of course not! That is quite normal. But I'm sure not one of us would even *think* of kneeling in front of such a picture and worshipping it! I can imagine some of you smiling and saying:

"No way, that would be crazy!"

Indeed, that would be extreme foolishness. And yet...

PORTRAITS AND IMAGES IN CHURCH



Mary with child Jesus
<https://www.etsy.com/au/listing/480536445/virgin-mary-print-catholic-prints>

At the time of the first Christian churches, photography was still unknown. They knew nothing about photography and portraits. But what did they do instead? They began making paintings of the Lord Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and church fathers. They hung those paintings in the churches to beautify and

decorate them. Others could not paint, but they understood the art of skilfully carving an image from a block of wood, stone or marble. One chiselled a woman with an infant in her arms. That represented Mary and her child Jesus.

Others carved or chiselled the images of the apostle Peter, Paul, Thomas, or other well-known people in church life. Those images were placed or hung in the church buildings. At first they claimed that they did this to remember the apostles or church fathers. Every time they looked at one of those images, they would think of the person the image represented.

But eventually, they began to *worship* those images. They knelt before those dumb images and placed burning candles around them.

They even burned some incense on that wood, stone or marble piece. That's how image worship gradually developed in the church. The church was going back to pagan idolatry.

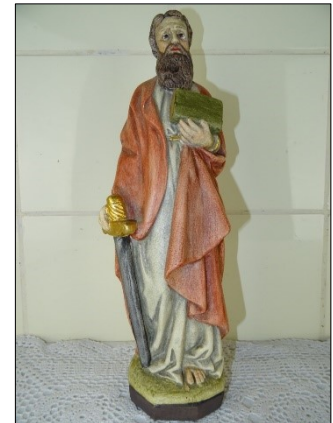


Image of the apostle Paul.
<https://www.curiosaenkunst.nl/>

It went from bad to worse. This worship of images still exists in the Roman Catholic Church. Their church buildings are full of images. Those images are everywhere on the headstones in Roman Catholic cemeteries, Roman Catholic buildings, and Roman Catholic homes. But if you asked a Roman Catholic man or woman: "Do you people worship those images?" they would immediately answer: "No way, we do not worship those *images*, but we worship the people they represent." They would say:

"When I kneel before the image of Peter, then I do not kneel to that piece of stone and worship *that*, but I kneel to Peter himself! That image only serves as a picture. We only use those images not to forget Peter, Paul, Mary or whoever it may be."

That sounds very nice, but it *is* pure idolatry!

Image worship has also contributed to gradually making the ancient Christian church, which began at Pentecost, become the false church. Just read what is written in the Heidelberg Catechism, question 97.

It asks:

"May we then not make any image at all?" And the answer is:

"God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Creatures may be portrayed, but God forbids to make or have any images of them or to serve God through them."



Praying to an image

And that is what the Roman Catholic Church does. They worship images and treat those bits of wood or stone with reverence and respect. They use

those images to serve God. Image worship is directly opposed to God's Word and the Catechism. God's Word forbids making images to serve whatever that image depicts. Just read the second commandment:

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image ... etc."

The Roman Catholics joined the first and second commandments and divided the tenth commandment into two. That's how Rome still has ten commandments but has made the second commandment of no effect. We again see that they believed the lie.

THE BEGINNING OF RELIC WORSHIP

When a family's father dies, the eldest son often receives his father's watch. Another child may receive his fountain pen or cigar case. Is there something wrong with that? No, of course not. We treasure those things, are careful with them, and keep those articles to remember the father or mother who died. That's quite normal.

When persecutions raged at the time of the first Christian churches, the believers respectfully buried the bones of the martyrs. Sometimes they retrieved those bones from the arena at the peril of their lives so they could bury them. That was fine. If only it had stayed like that. But it didn't. They later declared those bones to be holy. For instance, if they knew where the grave of Polycarp or any other beloved bishop was, they would open that grave, remove the bones and divide them among various churches. The leaders of those churches would carefully, with much respect, store those bones, perhaps in a golden chest. Some church leaders even went to collect those remains. The more, the better. They called those remains *relics*. We will tell you more about the relics later.

But it got even worse. Church leaders also began collecting the garments worn by these 'saints', objects they had touched or used, chairs or benches they had sat on, and even the instruments of torture with which the soldiers had tortured them! All these things became relics. Some churches had chests full of them.

It already began during the reign of Constantine the Great, about whom we told you in chapter 18. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great, had made a journey to the land of Canaan. There she had found the cross of the Lord Jesus. At least, that's what Helena believed. She took that cross with her, treating it with much reverence.

Someone else supposedly found the nails the soldiers had used to nail the Lord Jesus to the cross.



Nails supposedly used on Jesus.
<https://www.toptenz.net/>

Another came, very carefully carrying a garment. If you asked:

"What kind of rags are they?" that man would have become furious and cried out indignantly: "Rags? Shame on you! This is the coat the Lord Jesus wore!"

The churches diligently collected all those so-called relics.

Each church tried to get more than the next.

They began to buy those relics.

That's how the relic trade started.

But were all those claims valid? Was that piece of wood actually the cross of Jesus? Was that old rag indeed the coat the Lord Jesus had worn? No, of course not! It was all lies and deception.

Look, there goes a man with a little box. He is going to the bishop of a church. Once there, he very carefully opens the box and, in all seriousness, tells the bishop that he has found a few hairs from Peter's beard! He is willing to sell them. Soon after, he leaves the bishop's house with a substantial bundle of money in his pocket. And he secretly chuckles because he found that hair somewhere and earned a nice sum of money with a 'little lie'.

Another man came carrying several drops of blood and earnestly told the local bishop that this was the blood of the Lord Jesus. Those swindlers found the most amazing things. They found the wood of the tabernacles Peter had wanted to build on the Mount of Transfiguration. We can easily understand that this was impossible because Peter did not make those tabernacles, although he wanted to.

The people believed all those lies! They paid *fortunes* for those worthless objects! Some people had 'visions' about where you could find the remains of apostles or martyrs. People believed that too!

This trade of relics became a swindle of relics.

Poor, poor people! The church leaders were thoroughly deceiving them!



Veneration of the chains of Peter.
<https://www.catholiceducation.org/>

THE DECEPTION GETS EVEN WORSE

The church sank even further from the truth because they began to declare that those so-called relics worked miracles! Those worthless

items supposedly restored sick people to health and could cast out devils. They even raised the dead and averted plagues and disasters!

We must feel sorry for those people who believed all that nonsense.

When it became known that a miracle-working relic was somewhere, people travelled from far and wide to receive healing for their affliction.

A mother travelled for days with her mortally sick child to such a place, hoping the relic would heal her child.

A father went on a journey with his paralysed son, sometimes to another country, hoping the relic would cure his poor child.

People made many such "pilgrimages" in those days.

But did *all* the people believe in those relics? No, thankfully not! Many of God's people earnestly warned against the lie. But many did not believe them.

Emperor Theodosius, who lived at the time of the church father Ambrose, even prohibited the trade in relics. Yet it kept happening!

That relic trade lasted for ages, and faith in relics *still* exists! Many Roman Catholic churches still have relics and treat them with reverence.

Now look up 2 Thess. 2:11 in your Bible. There we read:

"And for this reason, God will send them strong delusion that they should believe the lie."

That word, written by the Apostle Paul, was fulfilled.

That word still finds its fulfilment in the superstitions of the Roman Catholic Church. We have now told you of various errors that have crept into the church of God: the worship of the saints, Mary worship, image worship, and the serving of relics, but there are still many more.

I hope to tell you more about them in the following chapters.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the original purpose behind the early paintings and statues of the Lord Jesus, His apostles, and the early church fathers?
2. What was involved in image worship?
3. What does the second commandment say regarding image worship?
4. How has the Roman Catholic Church remodelled the Ten Commandments to allow image worship?
5. What is a relic?
6. What extraordinary power did these relics supposedly have?
7. Explain 2 Thessalonians 2:11.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why do some people reject the use of the cross to symbolise Christianity?
2. How should we regard "good luck charms" such as the rabbit's foot?
3. What do we mean when we wish someone good luck?



‘Many Roman Catholic churches still have relics today and treat them with reverence...’

A small piece of wood, said to be of Jesus’ manger arrives in Bethlehem (2019). This relic is a gift of pope Francis

It is now being kept at the Franciscan Church of St. Catherine, next to the famous Church of the Nativity, traditionally known as the site where Jesus was born.

"We are proud that part of the manger is back in Bethlehem because we feel that the soul of God is with us more than before," Chris Giacaman, 53, a Bethlehem homemaker. <https://www.npr.org/>