

Module Two

Saints, Statues, and the Charge of Idolatry

Abide

A standalone session. Run it any time.

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Scripture shows the prayers of God's people being held and presented in heaven, and that the commandment against images sits in a Bible where God commands images.

Catholic Touchstone. These are two objections wearing one hat: that Catholics give to creatures what belongs to God. The answer to both is the same distinction, and it is a distinction Scripture itself makes.

What You Need to Know

Asking the saints

Start where every Christian already agrees. Asking another Christian to pray for you is not a rival to Christ's mediation; if it were, no prayer meeting could be held. St. Paul asks for prayer constantly. The only question is whether death ends the relationship.

Scripture says it does not. Our Lord says God is not God of the dead but of the living. Hebrews describes a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. And Revelation twice shows the prayers of the saints being presented in heaven: the elders hold golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, and later an angel offers much incense with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar.

One honest limit. The Church does not define the mechanism by which the saints know our prayers, and Catholics should not claim they are omniscient. What the Church does hold is that they are alive in God, that they love us, and that they intercede for us. That they know what we ask because God makes it known to them is the ordinary way the tradition has accounted for it, and it is a reasonable trust rather than a defined teaching; say it that way, and it will match what you say later at the Objection Bench. Anyone who demands a fuller account than that should be told plainly that the Church has not given one.

Images

Exodus 20 forbids making a graven image and bowing to it. Five chapters later God commands two cherubim of hammered gold over the mercy seat. In Numbers 21 he commands a bronze serpent to be made and looked at. Solomon's temple is full of carved figures: cherubim in the inner sanctuary, and cherubim, palm trees and open flowers carved on the walls and doors. 1 Chronicles 28:11-19 adds that the plan for the temple was handed to Solomon by David as coming from the Lord. So the commandment cannot forbid images as such.

And Scripture shows the line being crossed. In 2 Kings 18:4 Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent, the very object God commanded, because the people were burning incense to it. Tell that story. It concedes the danger honestly and shows that the distinction is biblical rather than invented.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat.” **Exodus 25:18**

The holiest object in Israel, the place where God promised to meet Moses, carried sculpted figures made at his command. Consider also 2 Maccabees 15:12-16, where Onias, a dead high priest, is seen praying for the people, and Jeremiah, long dead, is described as one who prays much for the people and the holy city. Whatever weight one gives that book, it attests that a Jewish writer of the period could picture the righteous dead praying for God’s people and the holy city, and expect his readers to find that intelligible.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Basil the Great

Cited in the Catechism at CCC 2132

The honour rendered to an image passes to the one whom the image represents.

The Catechism draws the conclusion itself: whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it. This is the single cleanest answer to the charge of idolatry, and it is not a modern rationalisation.

Securely located: quoted in the Catechism at the paragraph cited.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

On honouring the martyrs, City of God VIII.27 (summary)

Augustine insists that Christians do not offer sacrifice to the martyrs but to God alone, and that the martyrs are honoured for the sake of the God who crowned them. He is explicit that building altars to a martyr rather than to God would be the very thing pagans do.

Note that the objection is not new and neither is the answer. Augustine is already fielding the accusation in the fifth century.

Summary rather than quotation; see City of God VIII.27, on the manner in which the martyrs are honoured.

Voice of the Church

The Second Council of Nicaea

787

The seventh ecumenical council distinguished the veneration given to images from the adoration due to God alone, and taught that the honour given to an image passes to its prototype.

Useful because it shows the Church settling this in council in the eighth century, some seven hundred years before the Reformation raised it again. A second wave of iconoclasm followed in the East in the ninth century and was finally rejected in 843, which is worth knowing: the question was fought over, not merely legislated.

Historical; the council and its subject matter are securely attested.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 946-962 on the communion of saints, with 956 on their intercession.

- CCC 2683 states that the saints intercede for us and contemplate God, and that we can and should ask them.
- CCC 2129-2132 on images, the Incarnation, and the distinction between veneration and adoration.
- CCC 2112-2114 on idolatry, which is worth reading so your group knows the Church takes the charge seriously.

Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can cite two passages showing the saints in heaven and prayer together.
- 2. Every participant can answer the one mediator objection from its own context.
- 3. The group discovers that God commands images in the same book that forbids them.
- 4. Every participant can tell the Hezekiah story and explain why Catholics tell it.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.

"There is one mediator between God and men."

This is the main objection and the steelman handles it. If it comes early, ask them to read the four verses before it.

"Deuteronomy forbids consulting the dead."

Take it seriously; the prohibition is real and severe. What it forbids is necromancy: conjuring the dead to extract knowledge, as at Endor.

Asking a member of the Body of Christ who is alive in God to pray for you is a different act with a different object. And on the transfiguration mount, Moses and Elijah appear and speak with Christ, which no one calls necromancy.

"The saints cannot hear millions of prayers at once. That makes them gods."

Concede that we do not claim omniscience for them and that the Church has not defined the mechanism.

What is claimed is that they are alive in God and that God can make our prayers known. If someone wants more detail than that, tell them honestly that the Church has not supplied it. A flagged limit is better than a bluffed explanation.

"People clearly do treat statues superstitiously."

Agree without qualification. It happens, the Church condemns it, and CCC 2112-2114 name idolatry as a real sin.

Hezekiah is the answer: Scripture itself records an object God commanded being destroyed once it was abused. Abuse does not make the thing forbidden.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you are the only one we worship, and you have surrounded us with people who love you and love us. Teach us the difference tonight, and keep us from both coldness and confusion. Amen.

Win

1. Who have you asked to pray for you in the last month?
2. Do you have a photograph of someone who has died? What do you do with it?

Build

3. Read Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4. What are the elders and the angel holding?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, and then much incense offered with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar.

Ask the plain question: are those in heaven presented as involved with the prayers of God's people, or as uninvolved?

Add Hebrews 12:1, the cloud of witnesses, and Mark 12:27, that God is not God of the dead but of the living.

Live discovery. Give the group Exodus 20:4-5 and ask them to hold it. Then hand out Exodus 25:18-22, Numbers 21:8-9, and 1 Kings 6:23-29, and ask what has happened.

4. What did you find?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

God commands the making of images: two golden cherubim over the mercy seat, a bronze serpent to be looked at for healing, and a temple full of carved figures.

So the commandment cannot forbid images as such. It forbids making a god, an image treated as divine in itself.

Then give them 2 Kings 18:4 and let it land. Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent because people were burning incense to it. The danger is real, Scripture names it, and it does not abolish the cherubim.

5. What is the distinction Catholics are actually making?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Between the worship due to God alone and the honour given to those he has glorified, and between an image and the person it represents.

CCC 2132: the honour rendered to an image passes to the one it represents. Nobody thinks a soldier saluting a flag is worshipping cloth.

The Steelman

THE DEPTH Read in full.

The strongest form of the objection.

There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. One. Not one supreme mediator among many lesser ones. The whole point of the letter to the Hebrews is that we may now approach the throne of grace with confidence, directly, because the curtain is torn. Reintroducing a hierarchy of intercessors puts back the very apparatus the cross removed.

And whatever the theology says, look at the practice. People pray to a saint for a specific need, address statues, carry medals, and speak of particular saints as reliable for particular problems. Whatever a catechism paragraph distinguishes, that is functionally a pantheon, and it is exactly what the prophets spent centuries denouncing.

6. Read 1 Timothy 2:1-5 in full. What does Paul command in the four verses before the one everyone quotes?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all in high positions. He commands intercession, and then says there is one mediator.

So Paul plainly does not regard asking others to intercede as competing with Christ's unique mediation. He commands the first and asserts the second in one breath. That is the whole answer, and it is in the passage the objection is built on.

The Catholic position is that the saints intercede in Christ and through him, not alongside him. Their prayer has whatever value it has because they are in him.

On the practice: concede it, and do not defend the worst of it. Some popular devotion is unbalanced, some is superstitious, and the Church condemns superstition explicitly at CCC 2111. The remedy is catechesis, not pretending it does not happen.

End with the honest limit: we do not claim to know how they hear us, and the Church has not defined it.

Send

7. Is there a saint you actually have a relationship with? What is it like?
8. Where in your own practice could someone reasonably accuse you of superstition?

Live It This Week

- Ask one saint, by name, to pray for the person you have been praying for.
- Read Revelation 5 and 8 and notice what heaven is doing.
- Read 2 Kings 18:4 and sit with it.

Closing Prayer

Father, we worship you alone. Thank you for the friends you have given us in heaven and on earth. Keep our love ordered. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Memory Verse

"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." Hebrews 12:1

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

- Exodus 20:4-5, the commandment
- Exodus 25:18-22; Numbers 21:8-9; 1 Kings 6:23-29 (live discovery)
- 1 Chronicles 28:11-19, the plan for the temple given to Solomon
- 2 Kings 18:4, Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent
- Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4, the prayers of the saints
- Hebrews 12:1, the cloud of witnesses (memory verse)
- Mark 12:27, God of the living
- 1 Timothy 2:1-5, intercession and the one mediator (steelman)
- Deuteronomy 18:10-11, necromancy forbidden
- Matthew 17:1-8, Moses and Elijah on the mountain
- 2 Maccabees 15:12-16, Onias and Jeremiah praying

Catechism: CCC 946-962, 956, 2111-2114, 2129-2132, 2683.

Patristic and conciliar: St. Basil, quoted at CCC 2132. St. Augustine, on honouring the martyrs, City of God VIII.27. Second Council of Nicaea, 787.