

Radiant and Unfading

Take-Home • Session 12: The Folly of Idols

What We Found

From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator (13:5): beauty is a signpost, and idolatry is the tragedy of stopping at the sign. The author was gentle with the seekers, perhaps they go astray while seeking God, and firm at the stopping point: not even they are to be excused. Then the satire: the carpenter praying to the leftover log he nailed to the wall so it would not fall, the potter with a heart of ashes, and Psalm 115's warning underneath the comedy: those who make them are like them. You become what you worship. Nobody in our room carves wood, but all of us are shaped daily by screens, brands, bodies, and money.

Chapter 14 gave us the sailor who prays to an idol while it is your providence, O Father, that steers his ship's course, and then the verse we first met two weeks ago in the story of Noah: blessed is the wood by which righteousness comes (14:7), the ark's timber in the letter, and in the Church's ear, the Wood she unveils on Good Friday: behold the wood of the cross. God keeps saving his people by means of humble wood. Then the last great discovery of our study: Romans 1:19-25, where St. Paul's most famous argument, God knowable from creation, idolaters without excuse, glory exchanged for images, the exchange collapsing into the moral catalog that runs on through Romans 1:26-32, tracks Wisdom 13-14's four-move argument. And the question about Catholic statues was answered by the history of one object: the bronze serpent, commanded by God (Numbers 21), destroyed by God's king when Israel began worshiping it (2 Kings 18:4). The line runs through the heart's direction, not the statue's existence: the honor paid to an image passes to the person it portrays (CCC 2132). To know you is complete righteousness (15:3).

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Damascene • On the Divine Images, I.16 (8th century)

Defending the sacred images against the emperors who smashed them, he drew the line with perfect clarity, in words here condensed: I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, who deigned to dwell in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. The Incarnation changed imaging forever: the invisible God has shown his face.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bonaventure • The Journey of the Mind to God, prologue and chapters 1-2 (13th century)

The Seraphic Doctor teaches that the visible world is a ladder for ascending to God: creatures are vestiges, footprints, of the Creator, and the invisible things of God are understood through the things that are made. Elsewhere he calls creation itself a book in which the Trinity shines forth. Bonaventure is Wisdom 13:5 turned into a method of prayer: read the beauty, then climb it. Our takeaway: the idolater's error is not reading the book but worshiping the paper.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Henry Newman • *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (19th century)

Recalling his conversion at fifteen, Newman wrote of resting in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator. His testimony shows how immediate the knowledge of God can become, though not everyone arrives at that awareness with the same clarity.

Live It This Week

- **Read ahead, slowly.** Read Wisdom 16 with a pencil. Mark everything that has to do with food, and everything that has to do with morning.
- **Take an honest look at your attention.** List where your last seven days of attention actually went. Ask of the top three: signpost or shrine? Retire one shrine for the rest of the week.
- **Climb one beauty.** When beauty ambushes you this week, finish the trip: name the Craftsman out loud and thank him. Practice not stopping at the sign.
- **Pray before an image, correctly.** Five minutes before a crucifix, then before an image of a saint: through the crucifix you adore Christ himself; through the saint's image you honor a friend of God and ask his prayers; neither honor is for wood or paint. Do both on purpose and you will never confuse them again.

Memory Verse

“For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.” (**Wisdom 13:5**)

Before next session: read Wisdom 16.

Catechism references: CCC 31-32, CCC 2113, CCC 2132.

Scripture We Opened

- Tonight's text: Wisdom 13:1-15:19
- The discovery: Romans 1:19-25 (the moral catalog continues to 1:32)
- Psalm 19:1 (the heavens are telling); Psalm 115:4-8 (you become what you worship)
- Isaiah 44:9-20 (the older carpenter satire)
- Wisdom 10:4 (the wood motif's planting, resolved at 14:7)
- 1 Peter 2:24 (bore our sins in his body on the tree)
- Exodus 25:18-20; 1 Kings 6:29-35 (God-commanded images)
- Numbers 21:8-9 with 2 Kings 18:4 (the bronze serpent's full biography)
- Colossians 1:15 (the image of the invisible God)
- Acts 17:23-30 (Paul at Athens)
- Wisdom 16:7 (the serpent's saving turn)
- Genesis 50:20 (providence; the Father steering)
- Wisdom 15:2 (even if we sin, we are yours)
- Wisdom 7:14; 3:9; 8:2 (the knowing of friendship, abiding, and the bride)
- John 17:3 (this is eternal life); Romans 9:21 (the potter, in Paul's hands)