

3rd Sunday Lent B
March 6-7, 2021

Carving Idols for Ourselves

Readings: Exodus 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17; 1 Cor. 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

I have lost touch with much of network television; it does not particularly interest me. I am especially disinterested in reality shows of any stripe. One such show is American Idol, which ran for 15 years. I never saw an entire episode, nor was I aware the show went on hiatus, before resuming again a few years ago. But I'll admit that people enjoyed seeing emerging singing stars. It was hands down the #1 show on network television.

An idol is an image or representation of a god used as an object of worship. For centuries, some have claimed that the Church worships statues and is guilty of idol worship. In my series of columns on the ecumenical councils, that issue will be discussed shortly. It took a Church council to distinguish between honor and worship.

The term has obviously taken on a more general, even colloquial meaning- or has it? Is there a sense in which we do elevate certain figures to an almost godlike status? If we're honest, perhaps we have all done this. We may have a favorite professional athlete, Hollywood film star, pop musician. It is as tempting as it is dangerous to fall into this trap.

We Christians are called to worship God and God alone. Not even the greatest saint is worthy of worship, but rather veneration. We honor them and rightfully so. And there is nothing whatsoever wrong with honoring human beings. It is praiseworthy to honor our heroes. I think of the first responders at 9/11, the brave souls of the airplane that went down near Shanksville, PA whom we rightly honor. But we do not make them idols.

The prohibition against idols follows closely upon the 1st Commandment to love the Lord and Him alone. In fact, it is difficult to separate them. The word "decalogue" means literally "ten words" that sum up and proclaim God's law. The precise division of the ten commandments is contained neither in the passage from Exodus itself, nor in manuscripts.

No, it was St. Augustine who presented the numbering in the form in which known it today. I still recall memorizing them in 3rd grade. Both Catholics, as well as our Lutheran brothers and sisters, number the commandments the same way, while the Orthodox, Anglicans and other Christians number them slightly differently. But the content is the same.

Our Catechism teaches: “In fidelity to Scripture and in conformity with the example of Jesus, the tradition of the Church has acknowledged the primordial importance and significance of the Decalogue.”¹ They are neither optional, nor up for discussion, as some have brazenly suggested. We do not re-write them to conform to modern sensibilities. Rather, we adjust our behaviors and ideas to conform with perennial tradition.

The Catechism continues: “The Ten Commandments belong to God's revelation. At the same time, they teach us the true humanity of man. They bring to light the essential duties, and therefore, indirectly, the fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person.”² The commandments are *grave* obligations. We take them seriously because they “are engraved by God in the human heart.”³

Still, too many reject moral absolutes. A 2020 study revealed that 58% of Americans believe that moral absolutes are determined by the individual. Let that sink in for a moment. The very concept of an absolute is that it is not determined individually.

I still recall a heated discussion in college about moral theology. When someone declared that there is no such thing as a moral absolute, I simply asked him, “Are you sure about that?” “Yes,” he replied. “Are you stating that absolutely?” Because then at least we agree in part. There is at least one moral absolute! He wasn't very happy with me, so we changed the subject!

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 2064

² Ibid., paragraph # 2070.

³ Ibid., paragraph 2072.

As we progress this Lent, the Ten Commandments are a sure guide to moral clarity, and a path to true happiness. They are not merely a set of rules. To reduce them to that misses the fundamental point and role they can play in our lives. They are a beacon in the darkness, a buoy in the stormy waters of life.

Seeking to follow God's commands will not be easy, but it will bring about peace in our soul unlike anything else. Let's embrace the challenges of living God's commands.