

# Sacramentals

by Sebastian R. Fama

A sacramental is anything set apart or blessed by the Church to excite good thoughts and to increase devotion (*Baltimore Catechism No. 2*, Question 292). Fr. William P. Saunders notes that "a sacramental helps the faithful to sanctify each moment of life..." In short, sacramentals are reminders of God. They help us to focus on the eternal amid all of our daily distractions. Sacramentals can include statues, holy pictures, scapulars, medals, and relics.

Objections to the use of sacramentals are based on a faulty interpretation of Scripture. Those who object will usually appeal to Exodus 20:3-5 which reads: "You shall not have other Gods besides me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth. You shall not bow down before them or worship them."

God is not prohibiting the making of images, but the deifying and worshipping of them. Note the first and last lines of the passage. Also, consider what we find in Exodus 36:8 concerning the tabernacle curtains: "The various experts who were executing the work made the dwelling with its ten sheets woven of fine linen twined, having cherubim embroidered on them." And Exodus 37:7, concerning the Ark of the Covenant: "Two cherubim of beaten gold were made for the two ends of the mercy seat..."

In 1 Kings we read some of what was in Solomon's Temple: "In the sanctuary were two cherubim, each ten cubits high, made of olive wood" (6:23). "This rested on twelve oxen" (7:25). Finally, "On the panels between the frames there were lions, oxen and cherubim" (7:29).

Why did God ask that images be made for His Temple and the Ark of the Covenant? Do you suppose that He didn't understand His own commandment? Except for one late period, we see that not even the Old Testament Jews understood Exodus 20 to be an absolute prohibition on images. When we consider all that the Scriptures tell us, we can see that the views of that one period were an extreme and unnecessary attempt to obey a commandment. We see this same sort of thing happening in Matthew 12:10, when Jesus is accused of violating the Law because he healed on the Sabbath. The spirit of the Law was abandoned for the letter of the Law.

Pictures and statues of saints are valued in the same way that pictures of friends and family are. They are not idols, but visible reminders of what they represent. For idolatry to exist, a person must worship something or think of it as if it were God. A man who kisses a picture of his wife and children is not practicing idolatry. He is merely expressing love for his family. The same applies to pictures and statues of saints. Idolatry is an interior disposition. It is wrong to judge interior motives by what we think we see.

The lives of the saints are inspirational. Their images remind us of their testimony, which can encourage us in our own walk with God. In the early Church, when 99% of the people couldn't read and there were no readily available texts, statues, pictures and stained-glass windows were the common man's Bible.

If Exodus 20 were to be taken in the strictest sense, just think of what it would mean. Not only could you not have images of saints, but also no pictures of friends or family, no statues of George Washington, no paintings of Martin Luther, no picture Bibles, and no dolls or teddy bears. After all, if the Bible strictly prohibits the making of images, then you wouldn't be able to do it for any reason.

The idea that the early Christians refrained from making images is a myth that has been refuted by archaeology. There are several examples that remain from the first centuries. The Catacombs were covered with paintings of the saints. One notable example of a sacred object being venerated in the early Church can be found in the city of Herculaneum. Herculaneum and Pompeii were destroyed by an eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in the year 79. Herculaneum was totally buried and was only uncovered in modern times. In one of the houses archeologists found a kneeler that was placed in front of the burnt remains of a cross or crucifix. Eusebius talks of color portraits of Peter, Paul and Jesus that remained to his own time (325 AD). He also mentions a statue of Jesus and the woman cured of a hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34). He relates that the statue was in front of the woman's home (*The History of the Church* 7:18). Now if such practices are wrong but were common in the first century, why is there no

condemnation of them in the New Testament? Certainly such a "blasphemy" would not have been overlooked.

The scapular was originally a part of a monk's habit. It was a narrow piece of cloth that was worn over the shoulders. In the 13th century lay people began placing themselves under the spiritual direction of the different monastic orders. They were called Third Order members. To show that they were associated with a particular community (Carmelite, Benedictine, Trinitarian etc.) they would wear the scapular of that order. It was not always practical or convenient to wear the full scapular in daily life. Hence, the smaller modern-day version came into being. This consists of two small squares of woolen cloth joined by strings and hung around the neck.

In one way, having a scapular devotion is similar to being a sports fan. A sports fan will often wear clothing with the colors or logo of his favorite team. Wearing the team's colors is not an act of idolatry. It is an act of loyalty to the team it represents. Likewise wearing a scapular is not an act of idolatry. It is an act of loyalty to the spirituality of the monastic order it represents. Those who wish to wear the scapular should be enrolled in it by the proper religious authority. Upon enrollment, members agree to a particular prayer discipline. As a result, they share in the prayers of the community.

But critics will point to Mary's promise concerning the brown scapular of Mount Carmel as proof of idolatry. However, they only quote it in part and thus miss its meaning. They focus on the line that reads: "Whoever dies in this garment, will not suffer everlasting fire." The promise must be read in its entirety and in the light of Catholic teaching. The full text is as follows: "Take, beloved son, this scapular of thy order as a badge of my confraternity and for thee and all Carmelites a special sign of grace; whoever dies in this garment, will not suffer everlasting fire. It is the sign of salvation, a safeguard in dangers, a pledge of peace and of the covenant."

Note that Mary refers to the scapular as a "special sign of grace." The individual, as a result of prayer, receives grace. It is grace that enables us to live the Christian life and attain our salvation. Thus, whoever dies in this garment [assuming he remains faithful due to the grace received] will not suffer everlasting fire. However, if someone rejects the grace that is offered he may very well suffer everlasting fire.

The Church has always been careful to point out that no religious article is miraculous in itself and that salvation always depends upon the life of the wearer. Christians have been using medals since the earliest centuries. A second century medal has been found with the images of the apostles Peter and Paul. Examples of other holy medals have been found in the catacombs. Medals are coin-like objects made to commemorate persons, places, historical events or the mysteries of the faith. Medals serve as reminders of what they portray. They serve much the same purpose as the reminders of God worn by the Israelites in Numbers 15:37-40. There we read; "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon the tassel of each corner a cord of blue; and it shall be to you a tassel to look upon and remember all the commandments of the Lord'."

Relics are the remains or personal belongings of saints. From the earliest times, miracles have been associated with their use. God chooses to work through them to testify to the holiness of the individuals they came from. The use of relics is firmly rooted in Scripture. In Mark 5:25 the woman with the hemorrhage was cured after touching Jesus' garment. In Acts 19:12 we see that aprons and handkerchiefs touched by Paul were used to perform healings and exorcisms. Finally, in 2 Kings 13:20-21 we find a dead man coming to life after touching the bones of the prophet Elisha.

The early Church also venerated relics. In *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written around 155 AD, we see how Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was arrested and martyred for the Faith. After his martyrdom the authorities sought to deny the Christians his remains. Paragraph 17 relates it this way: "He [Satan] therefore proceeded to do his best to arrange that at least we should not get possession of his mortal remains, although numbers of us were anxious to do this and to claim our share in the hallowed relics."

When we look at all of the evidence, we can clearly see that the use of sacramentals is an ancient practice that in no way violates the dictates of Scripture.