

The Supermarket of Idols

Pope Francis

At the General audience the Holy Father reflects on the first commandment

"In order to truly love, we must be free from all idols", the Holy Father told a crowd of faithful gathered in the Paul VI Hall for the General Audience on Wednesday, 1 August [2018]. Resuming his weekly audiences after a summer pause in July, Pope Francis continued his series of catecheses on the Decalogue, focusing on the first commandment. The following is a translation of the Pope's reflection, which he delivered in Italian.

Dear Brothers and Sisters Good morning!

We have heard the first commandment of the Decalogue: "You shall have no other Gods before me" (Ex 20:3). It is good to pause on the theme of *idolatry* which is significant and timely.

The commandment bans us from setting up idols¹ or images² of any kind of reality³. Indeed, everything can be used as an idol. We are speaking about a human tendency that involves both believers and atheists. For example, we Christians can ask ourselves: who is truly my God? Is it the One and Triune Love or is it my image, my personal success, perhaps even within the Church? "Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2113).

What is a "god" on the existential plane? It is what is at the centre of one's life and on whom one's actions and thoughts depend.⁴ One can grow up in a family that is Christian in name but that is actually centred on reference points that are foreign to the Gospel.⁵ Human beings cannot live without being centred on something. And so the world offers the 'supermarket' of idols, which can be objects, images, ideas and roles. For example, even prayer. We must pray to God, our Father. I remember one day I had gone to a parish in the Diocese of Buenos Aires to celebrate Mass and after that, I had to celebrate Confirmation in another parish that was a kilometre away. I went on foot and I walked across a beautiful park. But in that park, there were over 50 tables with two chairs each, and people were seated facing each other. What were they doing? Tarot cards. They went there "to pray" to their idol. Instead of praying to God who is the Providence of the future, they went there to have their fortunes told, to see the future. This is one form of the idolatry of our times. I ask you: how many of you have gone to have your cards read to see the future? How many of you, for example, have gone to have your hands read to see the future instead of praying to the Lord? This is the difference: the Lord is alive. The others are idols, forms of idolatry that are unnecessary.

How does idolatry develop? The commandment describes the various phases: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness ... you shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Ex 20:4-5).

The word '*idol*' in Greek is derived from the verb '*to see*'.⁶ An idol is a '*vision*' which has the tendency to become a fixation, an obsession. The idol in reality is a projection of self onto objects or projects. Advertising, for example, uses this dynamic: I cannot see the object itself but I can perceive that car, that smartphone, that role — or other things — as a means of fulfilling myself and responding to my basic needs. And I seek it out, I speak of it, I think of it: the idea of owning that object or fulfilling that project, reaching that position, seems a marvelous path to happiness, a tower with which to reach the heavens (cf. Gen 11:1-19), and then everything serves that goal.

We then enter the second phase: "*You shall not bow down to them*". Idols need worship, certain rituals: one bows down and sacrifices everything to them. In ancient times, there were human sacrifices to idols, but today too: children are sacrificed for a career, or neglected or, quite simply, not conceived. Beauty demands human sacrifices. How many hours are spent in front of the mirror! How much do some people, some women, spend on makeup? This too is idolatry. It is not bad to wear makeup but in a normal way, not to become a goddess. Beauty demands human sacrifices. Fame demands the immolation of self, of one's innocence and authenticity. Idols demand blood. Money robs one of life, and pleasure leads to loneliness. Economic structures sacrifice human life for greater profit. Let us think of unemployed people. Why? Because at times the businessmen of that company, of that firm have

decided to lay off those people in order to earn more money. The idol of money. We live in hypocrisy, doing and saying what others expect because the god of one's self affirmation imposes it. And lives are ruined, families are destroyed and young people are left prey to destructive models in order to increase profit. Drugs too are idols. How many young people ruin their health, even their lives, by worshipping the idol of drugs?

And here we come to the third and most tragic phase: and *you shall not serve them*, he says. Idols enslave. They promise happiness but do not deliver it and we find ourselves living for that thing or that vision, drawn into a self-destructive vortex, waiting for a result that never comes.

Dear brothers and sisters, idols promise life but in reality they take it away. The true God does not demand life but gives it, as a gift. The true God does not offer a projection of our success but teaches us how to love. The true God does not demand children but gives his Son for us. Idols project future hypotheses and make us despise the present. The true God teaches how to live in everyday reality, in a practical way, not with illusions about the future: today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, walking towards the future; the concreteness of the true God against the fluidity of idols. Today, I invite you to think: how many idols do I have and which one is my favourite? Because recognizing one's own forms of idolatry is the beginning of grace and puts one on the path of love. Indeed love is incompatible with idolatry. If something becomes absolute and supreme, then it is more important than a spouse, than a child or a friendship. Being attached to an object or an idea makes one blind to love. And so, in order to pursue idols, one idol, one can even renounce a father, a mother, children, a wife, a husband, a family ... the dearest things of all. Being attached to an object or an idea makes us blind to love. Take this to heart: idols rob us of love, idols make us blind to love and, in order to truly love, we must be free from all idols.

What is my idol? Remove it and throw it out of the window!

¹ The term *Pesel* means “a divine image originally sculpted in wood or stone and mostly in metal” (L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3. p. 949).

² The term *Temunah* has a very broad meaning which can be reduced to a “likeness, form”; thus the ban is very broad and these images can be of any kind (cf. L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, *Op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 504).

³ The command does not ban images per se — God himself ordered Moses to make golden cherubs on the cover of the Ark (cf. Ex 25:18) and a bronze serpent (cf. Num 21:8), but he bans these from being worshipped and served, thus the entire process of deification of something, not just its reproduction.

⁴ The Hebrew Bible refers to Canaanite idolatry with the term *Ba'al* which means “lordship, intimate relationship, reality on which one depends”. The idol is domineering, takes the heart and becomes a pivot of life (cf. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 257-251).

⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2114: “Idolatry is a perversion of man's innate religious sense. An idolater is someone who ‘transfers his indestructible notion of God to anything other than God’ (Origene, *Contra Celsum*, 2, 40)”.

⁶ The etymology of the Greek *eidolon*, derived from *eidos* is from the root word *weid* which means *to see* (cf. *Grande Lessico dell'Antico Testamento*, Brescia 1967, vol. iii, p. 127).

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