

# *On My Heart Imprint Thine Image*



## **A closer look at the Crucifix and the Question of “Graven Images”**

by

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### **Introduction**

The use of images in the life of the church is nothing new. Crucifixes (crosses depicted with the body of Christ nailed on them) have been used in the church catholic (i.e. universal) for over a millennium. They also have a long history within Lutheranism. Many believe wrongly that the use of crucifixes is a “Roman Catholic” practice. Yet, the use of crucifixes, statues and other images have always been a regular and routine fixture in Lutheran congregations, both during Luther’s lifetime, and among the founding fathers of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Though there is a “catholic” element to the use of crucifixes, there is nothing uniquely “Roman Catholic” about it.

In spite of the pressure placed on many Lutherans in America to “fit in” with the prevailing winds of pietism and reformed Christianity, which favors the empty cross, many Lutherans and Lutheran congregations continue to use crucifixes. Crucifixes are used in the chapels of both our seminaries. They adorn the pages of synodical magazines and literature, and are fixtures in many

of our congregations. If you were to visit most of the original congregations of the LCMS you would find lovely crucifixes adorning their altars, not to mention other beautiful statues of Christ, or perhaps the four evangelists, and other such Biblical scenes. And we haven't even talked about depictions in stained glass yet, much less the artwork found in bulletins and Sunday School materials.

But even though the use of crucifixes and other statues and images in church life has been a source of contention throughout the history of the church, mostly because of the way some in the Reformed traditions have chosen to interpret Exodus 20:3-5 as we see below. This thinking has also been canonized, if you will in such documents as the Heidelberg Catechism (see Appendix A). Whether as a result of "Romaphobia," or a serious misunderstanding of the prohibitions found in the Old Testament, there can still yet be concern when many of our people see a crucifix.

The purpose of this paper is not to necessarily argue for the crucifix over an empty cross, nor to debunk the normally overstated and faulty charge that something is "too Catholic." We also will not seek to address the "numbering" of the Commandments themselves for catechetical purposes. While such matters will be indirectly a part of this paper, our goal is to address the heart of the issue, namely the foundational Scriptural understanding (or misunderstanding as it were) of the role of such images in the life of the church, with the specific emphasis on the crucifix itself. Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are from the New King James Version.

In the end, we will see that the charge that crucifixes are forbidden graven images is simply unfounded and results from a misinterpretation of the prohibition itself, and the context of the rest of the Holy Scriptures. In fact, when you search the Scriptures what one finds is that the opposite is actually true.

### **The First Commandment and Exodus 20:4-5**

As Lutherans we hold forth that our beliefs rightly should inform our practice, even as our practice will necessarily also inform our beliefs (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). In this case, it is no different. Everything in the debate over "graven images" (graven literally means "carved" or "hammered out") ultimately hinges on the interpretation of the commandment itself. That prohibition is as follows:

***You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.*** (Exodus 20:3-5)

There are several other passages where God commands similarly:

*You shall not make idols for yourselves; neither a carved image nor a sacred pillar shall you rear up for yourselves; nor shall you set up an engraved stone in your land, to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God.* (Leviticus 26:1)

*You shall not make for yourself a carved image -- any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (Deut. 5:8)*

*'Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molded image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen!' (Deuteronomy 27:15)*

The context alone of the prohibition in the Exodus 20:3-5 passage immediately shows that the "you shall not make for yourself an idol" ties in with the fact that "you shall have no other gods." The heart of the commandments and the prohibition, is about not having other gods, not the way that churches are decorated. The prohibition is really a clarifying part of the First Commandment that deals with idolatry. God will not share His glory with another. Of course, the fact that the Reformed churches separate the prohibition from the commandment only further contributes to this misunderstanding.

It is not wrong to use images properly (as stimulants or teaching tools to remember and recall God's saving work on our behalf) but it is sinful when the things are worshipped or revered in the place of God. We will see this as we look further into the context of the whole of Scripture. Ultimately, the issue is not whether or a crucifix or any other artwork is a graven image. They are graven images (i.e., carved, or hammered out). That is not the point of the commandment however. The issue is whether such an image is taking the place of the true God in one's heart. "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image ..." can not be severed from "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them."

### **Other Related Scripture Passages**

A passage of Scripture must not ever be taken out of context. This includes the immediate context before and after a text, as well as the context of the Scriptures as a whole. The proper understanding of Exodus 20:4-5 is made clear in verse 3, which says "You shall have no other gods besides Me." In addition to Exodus 20:3, verses 4-5 must be read in the larger context of the whole Bible. Other passages of Scripture make it abundantly clear that images of heavenly and earthly creatures are not, as such, forbidden by God. In fact, in some instances, God commands them to be made.

#### **Exodus 25**

In Exodus 25, God orders (i.e., commands) Moses to build an Ark to hold the commandments He had just given them. He tells Moses how to build the Ark and cover it with pure gold, adding:

*"And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat."*  
(Exodus 25:18-19)

So here we have God Himself ordering Moses to produce religious statues of angels, immediately after the commandments had been given. Simply put, God would not have given the

Israelites orders to break the very commandments He had just given them. But that is exactly where the Reformed misinterpretation of this commandment ultimately and logically leads.

Further, in Exodus 28:31-34, God instructs that Aaron's vestments should be decorated with pomegranates. In other words, God commands His people to make images of heavenly things (cherubim) and earthly things (pomegranates) to use in His worship.

This biblical tradition was continued when Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem. Two cherubim, approximately fifteen feet high and wide and covered with gold, stood in the sanctuary with the ark (1Kings 6:23-28). Carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers decorated walls (1Kings 6:29), doors (1Kings 6:32-35), and furniture (1Kings 7:36-37). Twelve statues of oxen supported the sea, the ritual water tank of the priesthood (1Kings 7:23-26). God consecrated all of these things for His worship (1Kings 9:1-3). We also see that the great curtain of the temple was covered in the image of angels (2 Chron. 3:14 and that Solomon had two huge golden statues of angels constructed for the Holy of Holies – in addition to the two on top of the ark itself (2 Chron. 3:10-13).

Similarly, Ezekiel describes graven images in the idealized temple he was shown in a vision, for he writes:

*From the space above the door, even to the inner room, as well as outside, and on every wall all around, inside and outside, by measure. And it was made with cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub. Each cherub had two faces... (Ezekiel 41:17-18)*

We cannot conclude, therefore, that making images of heavenly and earthly things, even for places of worship, is forbidden by Exodus 20:4-5.

### **Exodus 32:1-35**

The account of the Israelites fashioning for themselves a golden calf, even as Moses is returning with the Ten Commandments themselves, provides the first and ultimate test case as to what God's primary concern is in regard to images and idols. As we read from the beginning of Exodus 32:

*Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*

*And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."*

*"So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf.*

*Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"*

*So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD." Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.*

*And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!' "*

The people had grown impatient. Instead of “fearing, loving and trusting in God above all things,” their impatience was demonstrated in idolatry. A golden calf was made with an engraving tool. It was a “graven image.” Yet, it was clearly not the “making” of the golden calf that made God’s wrath burn hot, for He proclaims, *“They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!' ”* It is the reason they made it that mattered, namely to “worship”, “sacrifice”, and confess allegiance to it, rather than to God.

As already stated above, we already know that God later commanded golden oxen to be fashioned to support the sea of the priesthood in the temple (1Kings 7:23-26). Thus, God Himself demonstrates that the issue is not making carved or golden images of animals, creatures, or other things. Rather, the issue is the attitude of one’s heart towards those images and the reasons for their use. The golden calf in and of itself was never the issue. The idolatry that existed in the hearts clearly was. The reasons for their making it was manifested in their bowing down and looking to it as their god. This was their sin. This is what drew God’s wrath.

### **Numbers 21:8-9**

During the Exodus, God sent a plague of serpents to punish the Israelites. Moses interceded. The Lord told Moses:

*[The Lord said:] "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.*

This bronze snake fashioned by Moses as commanded by God was clearly made for a good purpose, unlike the golden calf of Exodus 32, which was made for an evil purpose. In Exodus 32 the people turned to the golden calf “itself” as their God who could deliver them. Here in Numbers 21, God commanded them to look precisely at this bronze statue of the serpent in order to be healed. The power was not in the “thing” itself but in the promise of God’s Word attached to it. But it didn’t matter if they prayed to the transcendent Father in heaven, or sought the immediate aid of the Spirit. If they didn’t look at the bronze serpent, they would die. At the very least this shows that statues could be used ritually, and not merely as religious decorations. After all, if God opposed all images, why would He have chosen to heal His people through one, and even make one a type of the Messiah, as John records:

*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)*

It is not as if God is only concerned with whether or not an image of a god you want to worship is made. He is concerned that no other god is worshipped, though this may certainly be represented by an image. God forbids the worship of images as gods, but he doesn't ban the making of images. If he had, then religious movies, videos, photographs, paintings, and all similar things would be banned. But as the case of the bronze serpent shows, God does not even forbid the ritual use of religious images.

Following this incident, the Israelites were allowed to actually keep the bronze serpent without Divine objection. It is only when they begin to adore a statue or an image as a god that the Lord becomes angry. Thus, when people did, over time, start to worship the bronze serpent as a snake-God (i.e. as they had the golden calf, righteous King Hezekiah had it destroyed:

*He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan. 2 Kings 18:4*

However, when they did not attach idolatrous significance to the bronze serpent, they were allowed to keep it as a reminder or memorial of God's deliverance and grace. God's wrath in both cases only burns against their "misuse" of the graven images.

## **The Form of God**

We've already seen above that God doesn't prohibit the making of statues or images of various creatures for religious purposes. But what about statues or images that seek to represent God Himself? Many Reformed individuals would say that's wrong because Deuteronomy 4 says the Israelites did not see God under any form when he made the covenant with them, therefore we should not make symbolic representations of God either.

*"[S]ince you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth." (Deut. 4:15-18)*

But does the above forbid such representations? The answer is clearly no.

Early in its history, Israel was forbidden to make any depictions of God Himself because he had not revealed himself in a visible form. Given the pagan culture surrounding them, the Israelites might have been tempted to worship God in the form of an animal or some natural object (e.g., a bull or the sun). But later God actually did reveal himself under visible forms, such as in Daniel 7:9:

*"As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was Ancient of Days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire."*

Also, the Holy Spirit revealed himself under at least two visible forms—that of a dove, at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and as tongues of fire, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). Ironically, many Reformed churches today will use these images when drawing or painting these biblical episodes and when they wear Holy Spirit lapel pins or place dove emblems on their cars.

### **Christ as an “Ikon” (Image) of God**

We read that when the magi *“had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”* (Matt. 2:11). Though God did not reveal a form for Himself on Mount Horeb, He did reveal one in the house in Bethlehem.

The bottom line is that when God made the New Covenant with us, He did reveal himself under a visible form in the person of Jesus Christ. For that reason, we can make representations of God in Christ. Even the Reformed use all sorts of religious images: Pictures of Jesus and other biblical persons appear on a myriad of Bibles, mosaics, picture books, T-shirts, jewelry, bumper stickers, greeting cards, compact discs, and manger scenes. Christ is even symbolically represented through the *Icthus* or "fish emblem."

Common sense tells us that, since God has revealed Himself in various images, most especially in the incarnate Jesus Christ, it's not wrong for us to use images of these forms to deepen our knowledge and love of God. That's why God revealed Himself in these visible forms, and that's why statues and pictures are made of them.

Ultimately, when Gabriel spoke to Mary, a new thing, beyond the wildest dreams of men, happened. God made Himself visible to men:

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”* Colossians 1:15

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.* (John 1:1 & 14)

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life - the Life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal Life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.* (1John 1:1-3)

Christ is the tangible, divine "icon" of the unseen, infinite God. The prohibition in Exodus 20:4-5 was not only to separate them from the heathen, but because God was simply not representable artistically. He is by nature spirit and therefore any graven image was a miscommunication of His nature. However, when Christ becomes incarnate, the graven image prohibition no longer applies because

*He [God's Son] reflects the very glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature.*  
(Hebrews 1:3)

God Himself made an image of Himself in the person of Jesus. Before the Incarnation, it had indeed been improper to portray the invisible God in visible form; but God, by taking fleshly form in the person of Jesus Christ, had blessed the whole realm of matter and made it a fit instrument for manifesting His image.

Yes, God is Spirit and desires to be worshipped in spirit, but He is not so worshipped apart from the physical realities which bring Him to us – namely His Son, the Word who became flesh. St. John of Damascus (c.675-c.749) put it well:

In former times (the Old Covenant) God, Who is without form or body could never be depicted. But now (the New Covenant) when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God Whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter Who became matter for my sake, Who willed to take His abode in matter; Who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation! (*First Apology Against Those Who Attack Divine Images*, 16)

Likewise, even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gets it right:

The sacred image, the liturgical icon, principally represents *Christ*. It cannot represent the invisible and incomprehensible God, but the incarnation of the Son of God has ushered in a new 'economy' of images.... Christian iconography expresses in images the same Gospel message that Scripture communicates by words. (paragraphs 1159 & 1160).

## **We Preach Christ “Crucified”**

Paul makes things very clear in 1 Corinthians:

*But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness... (1 Cor. 1:23)*

*I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2)*

He himself places Christ's crucifixion smack dab in the middle of the proclamation of the Gospel. What is the crucifix other than “Christ crucified” which Paul states that we boldly hold forth! He says that the entirety of the apostolic message is the crucifix (literally, "Christ in the state of crucifixion"), and that everything he would know of the Christians in Corinth is the

crucifix (literally, "Jesus Christ, and Him in the state of crucifixion"). A crucifix itself is nothing apart from the message proclaimed about Christ and what He accomplished there. But in the end, a crucifix "represents" the crucified Christ, which is the heart and core of the proclamation of the Gospel. It proclaims visually, what we proclaim orally. Nothing more, nothing less!



It is also clear, that one of Paul's goals was for this image of Christ to be clearly kept before the eyes of God's people as reminder of God's salvific activity. He states in Galatians 3:1:

*Foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?*

St. Paul was not just interested in keeping before our eyes the historical fact that Christ was crucified, but rather and most importantly, that he was

crucified for us, individually. As he beautifully proclaims in Romans 6:6

*Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.*

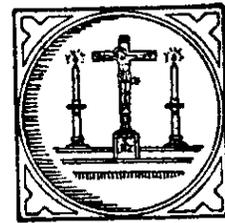
Here we say that it in Christ our old Adam is put to death. The crucifix can well serve as reminder of this very salutary thing, namely that our sins are not just drowned in water, but through space and time through the washing of the water and the word, Christ pulls us back through the water to His cross, and it is we who die on that cross with Him, it is we - in His flesh, His Body the Church, who are pulled backed through the water to with Him in the Jordan rightly confessing sins, repenting, and receiving His Real gifts. And real gifts come from a real God who was really and truly made flesh and really suffered and really died for us.

### **The Use of the Crucifix throughout the History of Christendom**

Consistent with the Biblical witness to the use of images, the earliest Christians in the first century used the symbols of a dove, a fish and a shepherd as simple religious art. Even though Christians had to worship underground, pictorial representations of events in the life of Christ can be found in the catacombs of Rome and Alexandria dating from the early 100s. By the 4th century, after the Edict of Milan (313), Christianity became officially recognized. Once the widespread persecutions cease and Christianity begins to be tolerated, the arts begin to flourish in the Church. There are many Christian writers bearing witness to the powerful role that such images held in the Church from this era. These include St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom and St. Athanasius. Moreover, the Seventh Ecumenical Council (and the related writings of St. John of Damascus) deal largely with this sort of issue.

The crucifix itself is found as early as the seventh century. During the iconoclastic controversy of 725-787 AD the Iconoclasts maintained that the use of religious images was a violation of the commandment, *"Thou shalt not make a graven image... thou shalt not bow down to them."* (KJV) The Iconoclasts replied that the coming of Christ had radically changed the situation, and that the commandment must now be understood in a new way, just as the commandment to *"Remember the Sabbath Day"* must be understood in a new way since the Resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week. In the end, after nearly a century of controversy, the Eastern Church finally settled on allowing painted, mosaic, or other "flat" images, but disallowed carved statuary and the like. It is important to note the Eastern Orthodox make use of such "icons," believing that they actually do contain that which they convey. This is clearly idolatrous. Again, it is not the artwork itself or what it depicts, but the attitude towards it that matters.

In spite of the many abuses to which the cross and the crucifix were subject in the Middle Ages, the Lutheran Church retained those beautiful symbols of the common Christian faith in her churches. From what I am told, you simply cannot go to a Lutheran church in Germany (even today) without seeing a crucifix prominently displayed.



Obviously, the use of images and pictures in a religious context is open to abuse and great misunderstanding, and in the sixteenth century, such abuses had become even more prevalent. Eventually conflict ensued between Lutherans and other Reformed Christians over the proper place of pictures, statues in the like in the church. Though the Lutherans were appalled by the abuses that had crept into the life of the church which were clearly idolatrous, Luther's once colleague, the theologian Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (c. 1480-1541), adopted a far more radical stance. After the municipal authorities of the town of Wittenberg had issued an "Order of the town of Wittenberg" dated January 24, 1522, demanding the removal of pictures from the churches, only three days later Karlstadt issued a tract concerning the "doing away of the pictures." In it he complains that, a full three days after the edict, the works of art had still not been removed. This led to widespread rioting where the "idols in paint" were torn down by Karlstadt and his supporters.

The Iconoclastic Riot in Wittenberg was followed by many similar attacks on art works in other places, notably in Zurich in September 1523. There the reformer Leo Jud (1482-1542) had preached the removal of idols, after which altar paintings, crucifixes, and statues of saints were smashed. Although Zwingli agreed with the removal of the images, he spoke out against using any kind of force. He recommended covering the sculptures in the churches and closing the winged altars, as was done anyway during Lent. Zwingli also declared that the pictures should not be subjected to mockery. In accordance with these principles, he demanded that the iconoclasts should be punished. In later days, Zwingli actually tolerated artistic representations, as long as they were not venerated but read as narratives.

Among the reformers, it was Calvin who adopted the most radical attitude towards religious works and demanded that believers should make no images of any sort of God. Nonetheless, he also observed that "there is no necessity to refute what some have foolishly imagined, that sculpture and painting of every kind are condemned here."

## Luther's First Attempt to Address the Issue

At a time when panic ensued, and abuses were certainly being made in regard to images, Luther was able to keep his theological moorings. In his Fourth Sermon, March 12, 1522, Wednesday after *Invocavit* (LW 51:84) he writes:

On the subject of images, in particular, we saw that they ought to be abolished when they are worshipped; otherwise not, - although because of the abuses they give rise to, I wish they were everywhere abolished. This cannot be denied. For whoever places an image in a church imagines he has performed a service to God and done a good work, which is downright idolatry. But this, the greatest, foremost, and highest reason for abolishing images, you have passed by, and fastened on the least important reason of all. For I suppose there is nobody, or certainly very few, who do not understand that yonder crucifix is not my God, for my God is in heaven, but that this is simply a sign. But the world is full of that other abuse; for who would place a silver or wooden image in a church unless he thought that by so doing he was rendering God a service? Do you think that Duke Frederick, the bishop of Halle, and the others would have dragged so many silver images into the churches, if they thought it counted for nothing before God? No, they would not bother to do it. But this is not sufficient reason to abolish, destroy, and burn all images. Why? Because we must admit that there are still some people who hold no such wrong opinion of them, but to whom they may well be useful, although they are few. Nevertheless, we cannot and ought not to condemn a thing which may be any way useful to a person. You should rather have taught that images are nothing, that God cares nothing for them, and that he is not served nor pleased when we make an image for him, but that we would do better to give a poor man a goldpiece than God a golden image; for God has forbidden the latter, but not the former. If they had heard this teaching that images count for nothing, they would have ceased of their own accord, and the images would have fallen without any uproar or tumult, as they are already beginning to do.

We must, therefore, be on our guard, for the devil, through his apostles, is after us with all his craft and cunning. Now, although it is true and no one can deny that the images are evil because they are abused, nevertheless we must not on that account reject them, nor condemn anything because it is abused. This would result in utter confusion. God has commanded us in Deut. 4:19 not to lift up our eyes to the sun [and the moon and the stars], etc., that we may not worship them, for they are created to serve all nations. But there are many people who worship the sun and the stars. Therefore we propose to rush in and pull the sun and stars from the skies. No, we had better let it be. Again, wine and women bring many a man to misery and make a fool of him [Ecclus. 19:2; 31:30]; so we kill all the women and pour out all the wine. Again, gold and silver cause much evil, so we condemn them. Indeed, if we want to drive away our worst enemy, the one who does us the most harm, we shall have to kill ourselves, for we have no greater enemy than our own heart, as the prophet, Jer. 17 [:9], says, "The heart of man is crooked," or, as I take the meaning, "always twisting to one side." And so on—what would we not do?

And in summary he writes:

Therefore I must admit that images are neither here nor there, neither evil nor good, we may have them or not, as we please.

## Luther “Against the Heavenly Prophets” (1525)

Again, while Luther was at the Wartburg, Karlstadt became a leader of the movement in Wittenberg to demolish everything connected with the Roman mass, and to do away with all traditional forms, images, vestments, and the like. This provoked excesses and Luther returned to preach against the destructive mob (as seen above), as well as other writings.

It is important to note that it was largely on the question of the sacraments that Karlstadt opposed Luther and found himself in Zwingli’s camp. For a disciple of Karlstadt brought the tracts to Zurich where the Anabaptist leaders read them, and to Basel where they were secretly printed. Late in 1524, the tract on baptism was confiscated, and the printer imprisoned. The remaining tracts were circulated, along with a statement of Karlstadt on his expulsion, and actually led to Zwingli’s statement on the Lord’s Supper and the consequent controversy between Zwingli and Luther on this issue. One cannot easily dismiss Karlstadt’s reaction to the crucifix and images from the whole argument over the Real Presence in the Lord’s Supper. If you don’t want to see Christ on the cross it may well be because you don’t want to see Him in the Sacrament either.

As we will see from the below (and lengthy) excerpted quotes from the pen of Luther in his treatise “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments,” the issue for Luther is always the heart and not the hands. He minces no words.

So it is with these honor-seeking prophets who do nothing but break images, destroy churches, manhandle the sacrament, and seek a new kind of mortification, that is, a self-chosen putting to death of the flesh. Thus far they have not set aright the conscience, which is nonetheless most important and most necessary in the Christian teaching, as has been said.

And if they had now altogether succeeded so that there were no more images, no churches remained, no one in the whole world held that the flesh and blood of Christ were in the sacrament and all went about in gray peasant garb, what would be accomplished thereby? What did they expect to achieve by pressing, straining, and pursuing this course of action? Would they therewith have become Christian? Where would faith and love be? Should they come later? Why should they not have precedence? Fame, vain glory and a new monkery would well thereby be achieved, as happens in all works, but the conscience would in no way be helped. Thus such false spirits do not care where faith or love are to be found, just as the pope does not care but presses on if only he can make sure of the works belonging to his obedience and laws. And when they do occur, still nothing has occurred.

I approached the task of destroying images by first tearing them out of the heart through God’s Word and making them worthless and despised. This indeed took place before Dr. Karlstadt ever dreamed of destroying images. For when they are no longer in the heart, they can do no harm when seen with the eyes. But Dr. Karlstadt, who pays no attention to matters of the heart, has reversed the order by removing them from sight and leaving them in the heart. For he does not preach faith, nor can he preach it; unfortunately, only now do I see that. Which of these two forms of destroying images is best, I will let each man judge for himself.

For where the heart is instructed that one pleases God alone through faith, and that in the matter of images nothing that is pleasing to him takes place, but is a fruitless service and effort, the people themselves willingly drop it, despise images, and have none made. But where one neglects such instruction and forces the issue, it follows that those blaspheme who do not understand and who act only because of the coercion of the law and not with a free conscience. Their idea that they can please God with works becomes a real idol and a false assurance in the heart. Such legalism results in putting away outward images while filling the heart with idols.

I will first discuss images according to the law Of Moses, and then according to the gospel. And I say at the outset that according to the law of Moses no other images are forbidden than an image of God which one worships. A crucifix, on the other hand, or any other holy image is not forbidden. Heigh now! you breakers of images, I defy you to prove the opposite!

In proof of this I cite the first commandment (Exod. 20[:3]): “You shall have no other gods before me.” Immediately, following this text, the meaning of having other gods is made plain in the words: “You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness ...” [Exod. 20:4]. This is said of the same gods, etc. And although these spirits cling to the little word “make” and stubbornly insist, “Make, make is something else than to worship,” yet they must admit that this commandment basically speaks of nothing else than of the glory of God. It must certainly be “made” if it is to be worshiped, and unmade if it is not to be worshiped. It is not valid, however, to pick out one word and keep repeating it. One must consider the meaning of the whole text in its context. Then one sees that it speaks of images of God which are not to be worshiped. No one will be able to prove anything else. From subsequent words in the same chapter [Exod. 20:23], “You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold,” it follows that “make” certainly refers to such gods.

For this saying, “You shall have no other gods,” is the central thought, the standard, and the end in accordance with which all the words which follow are to be interpreted, connected, and judged. For this passage points out and expresses the meaning of this commandment, namely, that there are to be no other gods. Therefore the words “make,” “images,” “serve,” etc., and whatever else follows, are to be understood in no other sense than that neither gods nor idolatry are to develop therefrom... Where however images or statues are made without idolatry, then such making of them is not forbidden, for the central saying, “You shall have no other gods,” remains intact.

If they do not want to apply “make” to images of God, as the text requires, then I will also say that worship is not forbidden (since we are clinging so strictly to the letter). For in the first commandment nothing is said about worship. I might say, “Don’t make images yourself. Let others make them. But you are not forbidden to worship them.” If they, however, from other passages connect “make” with “worship,” which is not done in this text, then in all fairness I may connect in the same text “make” with the gods, as the text clearly states. Thus we have no example of punishment being inflicted on account of images and altars, but it has followed on account of worship. We read thus that Moses’ brazen serpent remained [Num. 21:8] until Hezekiah destroyed it solely because it had been worshiped [II Kings 18:4].

Concerning this I have a powerful passage in Lev. 26[:1], *“I am the Lord your God. You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no graven image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land, to bow down to them.”* How is this? Here I think the interpretation is sufficiently clear. It is because of worship that idols and figured stones are forbidden. It is without doubt so that they will not be worshiped, and where they are not worshiped they might well be set up and made. What would be the need otherwise of referring to bowing down? Therefore the “making” in the first commandment must refer to worshiping and to no more. So also in Deut. 4[:15f.], where he forbids the making of images, the passage speaks clearly of worship.

We have also an example of this in the Old Testament. For Joshua (Josh. 24[:26]) set up a cairn at Shechem under an oak as a testimony, etc., even though above in Lev. 26[:1] the setting up of such cairns was as strictly forbidden as the images. However, because it was a stone of testimony, and not for worship, he did not do this against the commandment. Thereafter also Samuel (I Sam. 7[:12]) set up a stone and called it Stone of Help. This was also forbidden, as has been said, but because no worship but only remembrance was intended, he did not sin.

However, above all this, Joshua (Josh. 22:21f.), according to which the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh built a large altar by the Jordan, so that all Israel became alarmed and with deep concern sent messengers to them, as though the altar had been set up contrary to God’s command, which indeed was forbidden at that time. But see how they excused themselves. The altar remained when they heard that it was not for worship or sacrifice, but to be a witness. If, however, it had been incorrect to make an altar, and God’s commandment had been strictly applied to making, they would have reduced the altar to ashes. Otherwise they would not have escaped sin, as they said they would. Now the making of altars is as strictly forbidden as the making of images. If one then can make and set up altars and special stones, so that God’s commandment is not trespassed because worship is absent, then my image breakers must also let me keep, wear, and look at a crucifix or a Madonna, yes, even an idol’s image, in full accord with the strictest Mosaic law, as long as I do not worship them, but only have them as memorials.

For this reason we always read in the Old Testament, where images or idols were put away, that this was done not by the masses but by the authorities, just as Jacob buried the idols of his household [Gen. 35:4]. Thus Gideon pulled down the altar of Baal when he was called by God to be a chief [Judg. 6:27]. Thus Jehu the king (not the masses) demolished Ahab’s Baal [II Kings 10:26ff.]. So did Hezekiah also with the bronze serpent [II Kings 18:4]. Josiah did the same with the altars at Bethel [II Kings 23:15].

Let this be said about images strictly according to the law of Moses. The meaning is not that I wish to defend images, as has been sufficiently indicated. Rather murderous spirits are not to be permitted to create sins and problems of conscience where none exist, and murder souls without necessity. For although the matter of images is a minor, external thing, when one seeks to burden the conscience with sin through it, as through the law of God, it becomes the most important of all. For it destroys faith, profanes the blood of Christ, blasphemes the gospel, and sets all that Christ has won for us at nought, so that this Karlstadtian abomination

is no less effective in destroying the kingdom of Christ and a good conscience, than the papacy has become with its prohibitions regarding food and marriage, and all else that was free and without sin. For eating and drinking are also minor, external things. Yet to ensnare the conscience with laws in these matters is death for the soul.

However to speak evangelically of images, I say and declare that no one is obligated to break violently images even of God, but everything is free, and one does not sin if he does not break them with violence. One is obligated, however, to destroy them with the Word of God, that is, not with the law in a Karlstadtian manner, but with the gospel. This means to instruct and enlighten the conscience that it is idolatry to worship them, or to trust in them, since one is to trust alone in Christ. Beyond this let the external matters take their course. God grant that they may be destroyed, become dilapidated, or that they remain. It is all the same and makes no difference, just as when the poison has been removed from a snake.

Now I say this to keep the conscience free from mischievous laws and fictitious sins, and not because I would defend images. Nor would I condemn those who have destroyed them, especially those who destroy divine and idolatrous images. But images for memorial and witness, such as crucifixes and images of saints, are to be tolerated. This is shown above to be the case even in the Mosaic law. And they are not only to be tolerated, but for the sake of the memorial and the witness they are praiseworthy and honorable, as the witness stones of Joshua [Josh. 24:26] and of Samuel (I Sam. 7[:12]).

The destruction and demolishing of images at Eichen, in Grimmetal, and Birnbaum, or places to which pilgrimages are made for the adoration of images (for such are truly idolatrous images and the devil's hospices), is praiseworthy and good. However to teach that those who do not demolish them are therefore sinners is to go too far and to require more than is necessary of Christians who do enough when they fight and struggle against images with God's Word.

If you say, however: Yes, but while they remain, some will be offended by them and attracted to them, I answer: What can I do about that, I who as a Christian have no power on earth? Appoint a preacher who will instruct the people against them, or arrange to have them removed in an orderly way, not with tumult and riots.

Now then, let us get to the bottom of it all and say that these teachers of sin and Mosaic prophets are not to confuse us with Moses. We don't want to see or hear Moses. How do you like that, my dear rebels? We say further, that all such Mosaic teachers deny the gospel, banish Christ, and annul the whole New Testament. I now speak as a Christian for Christians. For Moses is given to the Jewish people alone, and does not concern us Gentiles and Christians. We have our gospel and New Testament. If they can prove from them that images must be put away, we will gladly follow them. If they, however, through Moses would make us Jews, we will not endure it.

The reference to images in the first commandment is also a temporal ceremony. St. Paul concludes and says among other things (I Cor. 7 [I Cor. 8:4]): "We know that 'an idol has no real existence.' " Just as he says of circumcision (I Cor. 7[:19]), "Circumcision is nothing,"

that is, it is a matter of freedom and does not bind the conscience, just as he himself throughout that section speaks of freedom. However, let St. Paul and all the angels be defied, in that they call something nothing or a matter of freedom, which God so strictly commands. So the fanatics allege. But one is not to consider God's commandment as useless or as nothing, as Moses says in Deuteronomy, for it does concern life.

He points out especially that "an idol is nothing in the world" [I Cor. 8:4] in relation to external matters. In relation to God idols are no joke. Such idols in the heart are false righteousness, glory in works, unbelief, and anything else that takes the place of Christ in the heart in the form of unbelief. As if he were to say, the Jews avoid the external idols in the world, but before God their hearts are full of idols. He also says of them (Rom. 2[:22]), "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" With these words he interprets in fine fashion the first commandment, which states: "You shall have no other gods before me" [Exod. 20:3], as if saying, "In relation to yourself or the world idols are nothing, but in relation to me, that is, in the heart, you may not worship or trust in them."

Since St. Paul declares that in all these three points the Corinthians have freedom, and would have these regarded as nothing, namely, idols, idol's temples and food offered to idols, all three of which are strictly prohibited in the first commandment and those following from it, it is indeed clear and proven forcefully enough that the reference to images in the first commandment is to a temporal ceremony, which has been abrogated in the New Testament. For just as I may with good conscience eat and drink that which has been offered to idols, and sit and dwell in an idol's temple [I Cor. 8:7–10], as St. Paul teaches, so I may also put up with idols and let them be, as things which neither make any difference nor hinder my conscience and faith.

True idols can do no harm as long as one worships while they are around, and only the true God is worshiped from the heart. Yet our enthusiasts would ensnare us who are free Christians and tie us down so rigidly that we should not be able to put up with any idols without committing sin.

If, however, these destroyers of images will not show us any mercy, we beg them at least to be merciful to our Lord Jesus Christ and not to spit on him and say, as they do to us, "Phooey on you, you servant of idols!" For the three evangelists, Matthew [22:19ff.], Mark [12:15ff.], and Luke [20:24ff.] write that he took a coin from the Pharisees upon which was a likeness of Caesar, and asked whose likeness it was and said it should be given to Caesar. If all kinds of images had been forbidden, the Jews should not have given any to him, nor possessed any, much less should Christ have accepted it and allowed this to be unrebuked, especially since it was the image of a heathen. He must also have sinned when, according to Matt. 17[:27], he asked Peter to take a tax shekel out of the fish's mouth and pay the tax for him. For he must have had to create the same image and the shekel in that very place and placed it in the fish's mouth. I presume also that the gold which the three holy kings offered to Christ [Matt. 2:11] was also coined with images, as is the custom in all lands. The same thing is true of the two hundred denarii (John 6[:17]) with which the disciples wanted to buy bread. Yes, also all the fathers and the saints are guilty insofar as they have used money.

Now we do not request more than that one permit us to regard a crucifix or a saint's image as a witness, for remembrance, as a sign as that image of Caesar was. Should it not be as possible for us without sin to have a crucifix or an image of Mary, as it was for the Jews and Christ himself to have an image of Caesar who, pagan and now dead, belonged to the devil? Indeed the Caesar had coined his image to glorify himself. However, we seek neither to receive nor give honor in this matter, and are yet so strongly condemned, while Christ's possession of such an abominable and shameful image remains uncondemned.

Would you here say, "You don't mean that the first commandment has been abrogated, for, after all, one ought to have a God? Furthermore, one ought not commit adultery, kill, steal?" Answer: I have spoken of the Mosaic law as laws of Moses. For to have a God is not alone a Mosaic law, but also a natural law, as St. Paul says (Rom. 1[:20]), that the heathen know of the deity, that there is a God. This is also evidenced by the fact that they have set up gods and arranged forms of divine service, which would have been impossible if they had neither known or thought about God. For God has shown it to them in the things that have been made, etc. (Rom. 1[:19–20]). Is it therefore surprising to find that the heathen have missed the true God and worshiped idols in the place of God? The Jews also erred and worshiped idols instead of God, even though they had the law of Moses. And they who have the gospel of Christ still misapprehend the Lord Christ.

Where then the Mosaic law and the natural law are one, there the law remains and is not abrogated externally, but only through faith spiritually, which is nothing else than the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 3[:31]). This is not the place to speak about that, and elsewhere enough has been said about it. Therefore Moses' legislation about images and the sabbath, and what else goes beyond the natural law, since it is not supported by the natural law, is free, null and void, and is specifically given to the Jewish people alone. It is as when an emperor or a king makes special laws and ordinances in his territory, as the *Sachsenspiegel* in Saxony, and yet common natural laws such as to honor parents, not to kill, not to commit adultery, to serve God, etc., prevail and remain in all lands. Therefore one is to let Moses be the *Sachsenspiegel* of the Jews and not to confuse us gentiles with it, just as the *Sachsenspiegel* is not observed in France, though the natural law there is in agreement with it.

I have myself seen and heard the iconoclasts read out of my German Bible. I know that they have it and read out of it, as one can easily determine from the words they use. Now there are a great many pictures in those books, both of God, the angels, men and animals, especially in the Revelation of John and in Moses and Joshua. So now we would kindly beg them to permit us to do what they themselves do. Pictures contained in these books we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding, since they do no more harm on walls than in books. It is to be sure better to paint pictures on walls of how God created the world, how Noah built the ark, and whatever other good stories there may be, than to paint shameless worldly things. Yes, would to God that I could persuade the rich and the mighty that they would permit the whole Bible to be painted on houses, on the inside and outside, so that all can see it. That would be a Christian work.

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes? This is especially true since the heart is more important than the eyes, and should be less stained by sin because it is the true abode and dwelling place of God.

### **A Review from Luther's Small and Large Catechism (1529) on the First Commandment**

Indeed, for Luther the heart is more important than the eyes. Further, the heart of the Ten Commandments is the First Commandment, "*You shall have no other gods.*" The heart of the First Commandment is also the heart itself.

Luther's explanation to the First Commandment, "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things" is expanded upon in his treatment in the Large Catechism:

A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God." (365:2-3)

The purpose of this commandments, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, and these fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone." (365:4)

Luther's concern is the heart, for with God the heart is the heart of the matter!

### **Conclusion**

According to God's express command, a prohibited "graven image" is an image that is worshipped from the heart, and not necessarily one made with the hands. If our piety takes the path of worshiping such a thing, then, yes that's a problem. But as with any created thing, there is always the risk of idolatry. This has been a challenge for God's people for some time all the way back to the days of Moses and beyond. But ultimately, since all idolatry comes from the heart, anything could ultimately become idolatrous. But it is not the thing itself that is necessarily the problem, but again, the attitude of one's heart towards it.

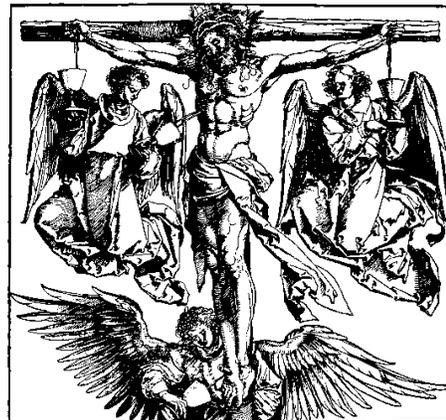
Having reminders, even graphic reminders of the reality behind what we believe, teach and confess can be meet, right and salutary. It should not be discouraged. For instance, would anyone seriously want to deny the opportunity for a deaf and mute person to "see" what Christ did for them, even though they can not hear, nor articulate it. Also, perhaps the opportunity for a blind person to touch a crucifix may also be helpful to them in learning about the salvation that God

has accomplished at the cross. Moreover, the question must be asked, “What speaks more to the unbeliever, an empty cross, or a cross with Christ on it? In Lutheran theology, the focus is always on God and what He has done. Well you can’t get much more central than what Christ has done for us in terms of what took place at Calvary. The crucifix encompasses and holds forth the salvific event on which everything hinges.

In many ways, the use of the arts can actually help us keep this central and proper focus. In the words of Rev. Paul McCain, in an article that was letter modified for use in the Lutheran Witness (February 1999, Q&A, p. 31):

Lutherans have never believed that banning or limiting proper artwork in the church is the way to prevent its improper use. Rather, we believe that proper teaching and right use is the best way, and the way that is in keeping with the gift of freedom we have in Christ to use all things to the glory and honor of God. Thus, many Lutherans use and enjoy the crucifix as a meaningful reminder of our Lord’s suffering and death. (<http://messiah-lcms.gatheringspot.com/beliefs/crucifix.htm>)

This is ultimately what it is all about! As Paul proclaims to the Corinthians after giving them the words of institution of the Lord’s Supper, “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.*” (1 Cor. 11:26). Yet we do not try to “eat” the crucifix or have wafers that look like “flesh.” That is not the point. Such would be idolatry. To say the corpus on a crucifix IS Christ, as if he is contained in the image, that would be idolatry. We don’t worship the crucifix, but rather, we worship He who stands behind it’s representation, Christ. In the same way, we don’t worship the Bible either (i.e., the leather, the binding, the actual paper) even though we believe that Christ is the Word made flesh. Nor do we claim that the crucifix is the crucified Christ, rather that it shows forth the Lord’s saving grace in Christ.



Any worship of anything “temporal” would be a violation of the First Commandment against the “worshipping” of graven images. But ultimately any temporal depiction is merely a temporal, historical representation of the eternal truth. As Lutherans, we resist both extremes that came out of the Iconoclastic controversy. Like Luther, we renounce those like Zwingli and Karlstadt, who would strip the churches of all crosses, statues, organs, and other imagery and ornamentation. At the same time, we would renounce those among the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches today, who venerate such statues and icons *as if* they were the object they represent.

Christ is not present in the crucifix, but rather, the crucifix visually proclaims God’s atoning work in Christ along with all the other historical symbols of the church. We don’t know exactly what the cross looked like to begin with. But that is not the point. The point is that Christ actually came in a physical and tangible way. The Father did not. The Spirit did not. But Christ is the very icon of God, the image of God. We don’t know what the Father looks like, nor the

Spirit. We also don't really know what the Son looked like, but we do know that the Son came as true man who suffered and died for us on the cross.

The improper use (i.e. worship) of images is clearly forbidden by Exodus 20:4–5, and our Confessions strongly condemn the abuse of images (Ap XXI 34-39) but the Bible nowhere forbids the proper use of images, that is, as reminders of Christ and what He has done, and so as aesthetic aids to devotion.

There is nothing contrary to God's Word, or our Lutheran Confessions, about the proper use of the crucifix, just as there is nothing wrong with the proper use of an empty cross or any other church symbol. Such are not bad things as long as one doesn't start idolizing them, but uses them as pious reminders of the great things God has done for us. We have freedom as Christians to use, or not use, either. However, the use of arts in the church, and especially the cross or crucifix, should always be used to give glory to God, and to build up and edify the body of Christ.



Ultimately, any cross (or any object) can become the source of idolatry, especially as all idolatry begins in, and lives within, the heart. Someone can make an idol of an empty cross (or of not having any cross at all) as easily as they can make an idol of a cross with a corpus on it. Yet where Christ is on the cross, one cannot so easily forget what He did and accomplished there for them. This is the reason He came after all. While there are many aspects to the narrative of the Gospel worth showing forth artistically, such as Christ's birth, His baptism, His resurrection, and His ascension, in one image the crucifix captures artistically the whole narrative of salvation. Not all of the evangelists record the Christmas narrative (Mark/John) or Easter (Mark), but the Lord's passion is central to them all. We really do preach Christ crucified and seek to proclaim His death until He returns.

There is a reason for the ancient custom of holding a crucifix before a dying person's eyes, and it isn't idolatry but faith. God enjoined us in Deuteronomy 6 to hold forth the true teaching of God before our children's eyes:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. (Deut. 6:4-8)*

As Luther put so well, "If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?" Yes, holding a crucifix before someone's eyes, whether they are 8 or 80, is meet, right and salutary.

On my heart imprint Thine image,  
Blessed Jesus, King of Grace,  
That life's riches, cares, and pleasures  
Have no power Thee to efface.  
This the superscription be:  
Jesus, crucified for me,  
Is my life, my hope's Foundation,  
And my Glory and Salvation.  
[TLH 179/LW 100]

