Chapter 21

The origin of the idols and various forms of idolatry

From all that has been explained so far, it evidently follows that there is but one true God, whose divinity only the ignorant deny, or falsify by multiplying. For if God cannot be a non-existence, as St. Athanasius pointed out, so to multiply the divine essence is the same thing as to deny it. Before discussing idols, let us examine the reasons why men create many gods of various kinds.

Just as the light of a single candle can seem like many lights to eye which an overflowing humour has relaxed and disordered so that they have lost a little of their natural balance, in the same way idolaters have divided into many lights that single eternal light which illumines all creation, under the influence of their ill humours. These are the evil sentiments of greed and covetousness with which the devil enlarges and confuses our senses, to the extent that, though they see that the heavens and other domains could not have created themselves nor given life to the bodies, yet they are unwilling to recognise a single universal cause and prefer to imagine that there are as many gods as there are natural species hence, one creator of lions, another of horses, another again of water, and so on. The poets seized the opportunity to concoct fabulous families of gods with which they filled their books and convinced the world.

As to the origin of idols, although these derive from various first principles, the chief one is the great love which some children have for their parents and some parents for their children. According to St. Bonaventura, when Belo, King of the Assyrians, died, his son Nino, who succeeded to the kingdom, had a statue made which resembled his father in every way, so that he would be consoled by the memory which it aroused when he saw it. He thought so highly of it that any criminal who took sanctuary beside it, however grave the offence, was spared the penalty. The respect shown by the king was followed by his subjects, and the same thing happened when other statues were erected. The honours and sacrifices made to these

(a) The gods of the heathen were recognised more by their ill-deeds than by their names: Quorum crimina sunt noxiors quam nomina. (their crimes are more noxious than their names). Jupiter was known for his adultery, Venus for her dishonest living, Bacchus for his insobriety. Hence the Athenians possessed a statue of an Unknown God, who was not recognised as God because he was holy, pure, and abhorred sinning.
idols increased, as if they were being made to God Himself, who is always so jealous on these points that he forbade the Hebrews, His people, graven images and any worship of those they had.(b) At a later date, idols copying these ones were taken from this kingdom to other kingdoms and no less revered; and since different languages were spoken in the various kingdoms, the idol which was first called Belo came to be called Beel in one place, Baal in another, and Baalim in a third. The devil sometimes spoke through these statues in reply to questions, when God permitted it. In this way the whole world was filled with different errors, the most serious of which is to think that God is the work of man's hands, a belief which can only be held by those who lack any understanding.

This cursed ignorance spread among the heathen of this Province, as already stated. Although they do not give the respect due to God to all their idols, yet it is a great affront to Him that they see any good in such feeble objects or imagine any power they have. I maintain that the Creator suffers a greater injury from these savages than from those who worship the Sun, the Moon, and so on, for these objects of worship are nobler ones. But in a piece of wood shaped so badly that it evokes disgust, or in an anthill (lit., a tower of bagabaga) of coarser material, etc, where can one detect the vision and word of God, His feeling, understanding and will, His Providence, or even His power since (the wooden idol, for instance,) cannot save itself from the bagabaga which eat it up and destroy it? Only ignorant beings could consider as their Creator and Supreme Cause an object which is very far from drawing its existence out of nothing, which very obviously is the product of common matter and of its inventor and shaper, whom the idol might reasonably consider its creator since he gave it shape and form, aspects which God (as essence) is free from, together with all other material qualities. To sum up, everything is seen the wrong way round. From this blindness there grows up the greatest error of all, the failure to recognise the True God; and since the nature of that blindness and the form it takes has now been shown, let us go on to discuss how we ought to recognise Him. /†. 104/.

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(b) Deuteronomy, 4 [vv. 16-19].