

Can I get a tattoo and still be a faithful Catholic?

It's funny how many people ask me this question. But it makes sense: tattoos have become more and more common. From at least five different "reality" TV shows about tattoo parlors, to every other celebrity sporting some kind of tattoo, it is no wonder that a 2007 Pew Research Center poll reported that 36 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds and 40 percent of 26- to 40-year-olds has at least one tattoo. That number seems to be an understatement if, like me, you've visited ValleyFair (or a family reunion) any time recently.

Regardless of whether you think they are tacky or awesome, the question remains: Is it a sin to get a tattoo? The answer: not necessarily. As with everything, we first look to God's revelation through Scripture to see if He has weighed in on the issue. As it turns out, something like tattoos are forbidden in the Old Testament (cf. Leviticus 19:28). Now, before we consider the case closed, we have to pay attention to what kind of command this is. Is it a conditioned command or an absolute command?

This passage refers the ways in which the People of Israel were to be different than the pagans among whom they lived. For those pagans, tattooing meant something specific; it was associated with their religions and their gods. It makes sense, then, that Jews ought to avoid these markings. But when that context passes, does the command still hold? Not in this case.

There is nothing "intrinsically wrong" with a tattoo. It is not "always and everywhere wrong" to get a tattoo. That being said, we need to look more closely at two factors that could change this: kind and degree. It seems like a no-brainer to say that "what a person gets tattooed on them matters". But there it is: if I am a Christian, I may not simply etch whatever I want on my body. In the same way that my being a disciple of Jesus means that I may not do whatever I want or wear whatever I want; if my tattoo of choice does not uphold human dignity or Divine sovereignty, then it would likely be a sin to tattoo that thing on my body.

That is the "kind" of tattoo, what about the degree? While many people get tattoos to represent their deepest beliefs (Christian tattoo art is on the rise), or to remember a loved one, is there a point at which there could be "too many" tattoos? The answer to this question will be deeply personal. It requires that a person look at their motivation in desiring a tattoo. But looking at one's motivation is nothing new. All of us should regularly examine our motivations: Why do I constantly change my hairstyle? Why do I need to be the center of attention? Why do I wear so much make-up? Why do I need to workout so much? Why do I need people to like me? The additional problem with tattoos is the fact that there is a destructive and permanent element to it.

Some people claim that the process of getting a tattoo has a cathartic effect on them. The pain becomes a certain kind of "release". This might be "fine", but it also could be destructive and unhealthy. Many young people resort to cutting,

burning, or freezing their skin for a similar emotional “release”. This is a sin against the Fifth Commandment. Can we say that getting a tattoo is completely different? Maybe. Maybe not.

One last thought: while there may be nothing sinful in the tattoo you desire, I would recommend that you stop and think before you settle on this image. Ask yourself, “What would I have tattooed on myself ten years ago?” A twenty-two year old girl may have gotten anything from a princess to Ricky Martin or N’Sync. A boy the same age might have gotten the silhouette of Michael Jordan. I would have gotten a Superman symbol (and yes, I would have been “a little too old for that” even then).

Here’s a little test if you are thinking of a tattoo: get the image (or words) that you would like carved in actual-size onto a piece of wood. Carry that piece of wood in your pocket every day for a year. Every day, take that piece of wood out of your pocket and look at it. (If your tattoo is too big to fit in your pocket, get it silk-screened onto a t-shirt and wear that shirt every day). If at the end of the year, you still want the tattoo, you have my blessing.