

# Catholicism and Culture

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

**I**N OCTOBER I wrote about “the Church’s way of entangling herself in any culture she finds herself in, even to the point, at her best, of informing it totally. The greatest, never equalled, example is the absorption of the Græco-Latin civilization into Christianity.” I cited as an instance of this inculturation the origins of the feast of Christmas in the pagan Roman festival of the unconquered sun.

Statements about the practices of Roman religion are bound to be conjectural. Evidence is scanty and ambiguous, so that any one theory will inevitably be countered by its opposite. That’s what scholars do to one another. It is plausible, however, that a pagan mythology that honoured Apollo as the sun god would have rejoiced in the restoration of his power over darkness as the days began to lengthen again in late December. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* suggests that in the fourth century Christians supplanted the pagan festival of *sol invictus* (the unconquered sun) by honouring Christ as the true *Sol invictus*, the Sun of Righteousness. Support for this theory comes from a mosaic (reproduced below) that was discovered in the excavations that took place under the Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome:



The halo in the form of a cross indicates that the figure is Jesus Christ. Otherwise, the picture is that of Apollo driving the chariot of the sun in his daily circuit of the heavens. The logic of the transfer of Apollo to Christ would be the Church's recognition that paganism, in its cult of Apollo, was all unknowingly, groping after Jesus, the true light of the world. Christians, therefore, could use the pagan image to open the minds of their non-Christian neighbours to the truth of the Gospel, as Paul did in Athens:

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

And Paul goes on to quote pagan poets in his address to the Athenians. Other instances of the Christian appropriation of pagan art can be found in images of Jesus as the good shepherd and as the teacher of the true philosophy. I may note here that the present Pope has advanced another reason for Christians' choosing 25 December as the birthday of Jesus. By the mid-fourth century, when Christmas entered the Church's calendar, the Annunciation was already being celebrated on 25 March, the vernal equinox. Nine months later—25 December—would have therefore been observed as the day of Jesus's birth. (This use of the vernal equinox, another pivotal day in the pagan year, invites us to further reflection on Christian use of natural religion.)

Whatever the case may be, the feast of Christmas is inseparably connected with the image of Christ as the light of the world, which has a prominent place in the opening verses of the Gospel of John:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.

This text is used as the Gospel for the third Mass of Christmas, the Mass during the day. Traditionally, the first Mass, at midnight, celebrates the eternal generation of the Son from the Father in the Trinity; the second, at dawn, commemorates the birth of Jesus in history, and the third, the mystical coming of Christ into the souls of the faithful. The vitality of Christianity is

thus illustrated in the confidence with which the early Church entered into the culture of its day, sifting out what was valid from what was corrupt. The conviction was that paganism at its best is a preparation for the Gospel, a remote parallel to what God had given to the Jews. Equally significant was the use of Platonic and, later, of Aristotelian philosophy in the service of theology, which reached a climax in the thirteenth century in the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Another, highly controversial instance from our own time would be the attempts of Teilhard de Chardin to reconcile Christianity and evolution. The fact that in July of this year the Holy Father referred to him favourably may indicate a softening of the suspicion with which he has long been regarded.<sup>1</sup> ❧

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<sup>1</sup> “The role of the priesthood is to consecrate the world so that it may become a living host, a liturgy: so that the liturgy may not be something alongside the reality of the world, but that the world itself shall become a living host, a liturgy. This is also the great vision of Teilhard de Chardin: in the end we shall achieve a true cosmic liturgy, where the cosmos becomes a living host.” Benedict XVI, Homily delivered at vespers in the Cathedral of Aosta, Italy, 24 July 2009. [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20090724\\_vespri-aosta\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090724_vespri-aosta_en.html)