

Against Idolatry – Part I

As Catholic Christians we are *theists*. That means we believe in One God who created all things and is Himself above and distinct from his creation. This is opposed to *Pan-theism* – or earth worship, which holds that God is identical with his creation and that creation is an extension of Himself and therefore is to be worshiped as divine. This is not our religion.

Recently, there was grave confusion made manifest in the Church during the Special Synod on the Amazon, held in Rome in October. At the events surrounding the Synod, a particular image was introduced that was purported to be a “representation of mother earth,” and which later came to be identified as “Pachamama”, a deity worshiped by the indigenous peoples of South America. This pagan worship consisted of prayers to mother earth and making offerings and sacrifices to her for good harvests and abundance of produce. While it forms a part of the indigenous culture which the Church has encountered during her missionary activity, it is also a false god that – by itself and left unchanged – is incompatible with the Catholic Christian faith that we profess.

Many times in the past, the Church has encountered false or deficient notions of the divine or of spiritual things and has “baptized” them in order to draw people attached to those notions into the truth of the Gospel. There is of course the famous example of St. Paul in the Aeropagus of Athens in Acts Chapter 17. There he noticed a shrine to the “unknown God” and used it as a “point of connection” to announce the Gospel. He indicated that they were worshiping an unknown god, but he took the occasion to reveal to them the One True God to worship rightly. However, later on in Acts, he directly confronted the idol worship in Ephesus. In Acts 19 we hear about Demetrius the silversmith, who made little household deities for people to worship. These were pagan totems and idols, and Paul rightly condemned them by saying, “Gods made with hands are not gods.” But of course, this was bad for business for the silversmiths who make idols, so they quarreled with Paul.

In the Roman world, the cult of the “sol invictus” or “unconquered sun” was seen as a very good parallel with our Catholic Christian notion of Jesus Christ as the Light of the World that has conquered darkness. It also was felicitous that this “god” of the unconquered sun was worshiped on Sun-Day, the same day as the Christians celebrated the rising of Christ from the Dead. The **evangelization of culture** occurs by redirecting the focus of worship. For example: “*What you worship wrongly as ‘sol invictus’ – that is, the actual celestial phenomenon of the star we call the sun rising every morning without fail to bring light into the world – can be redirected to the right worship of the One True God who is the Creator of the sun and all the stars and who is the True Light of the world.*” In this way we can “baptize” a pagan belief and infuse it with the Spirit of the Gospel.

However, we have to be very purposeful and direct with this baptism and be very careful to not admit *syncretism*, that is, the blending of meaning between two opposing religions. The Church had to be careful and took great pains to clarify in the ancient Church the truth so as to not lead people into false worship when utilizing certain baptized pagan practices. The same is going on now in places like Africa where we fight against animist religions, or in India where we have to fight against the nihilism of Buddhism or the polytheism of Hinduism. This is also what is required when encountering the earth worship of the indigenous people of South America.

While we often personify nature for poetic reasons even as Christians, we make a clear declaration that nature is God’s creation, and as such, is not to be worshiped. Any semblance of worship – such as making offerings, sacrifices and gestures such as prostrations – is to be avoided.

What has caused great alarm at the Amazon Synod was not necessarily that there was idol worship, but rather that there was a grave lack of clarification and distinction, leading many believers to be rightly scandalized. There were ceremonies that looked very much like worship of idols taking place, without an explanation of what the Christian understanding of this was meant to be. There were also prayers that were published that were directed towards the earth without any necessary nuance that the earth is not a god to whom we can pray.

While we have oftentimes in the past had great success in “baptizing” cultural expressions when we encounter in them elements of the truth, we have also at times had to be very bold in our proclamation of Christ as the One True God to whom alone worship is due. This is exemplified perfectly by St. Boniface, who cut down the pagan god Donar’s oak tree and preached rather the truth of Christ. The people were so impressed by Boniface’s courage and the clarity of his preaching about Christ, that they were converted and baptized.

There is a right way to encounter and respect the hints of truth found in the many human expressions of culture, but we must never be afraid to acknowledge that Christ is the True Light of humanity and that He must be proclaimed as the One True God. It is true, the care that we take of the earth that God has created in His providence does in fact give Him glory. But let’s not make the mistake of confusing our poetic personification of our common home as a mother – with the truth that only God Almighty is worthy of our adoration, and to Him alone must we bend the knee and offer the sacrifice of praise.

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