

**Pre-Christian Origins of
Italian Popular Religion
Part I**

A Term Paper

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Introduction

“...And so we came to Rome.”¹ These brief words of Luke at the end of Acts symbolically mark what Paul would consider the climax of the expansion of the Kingdom of God in his lifetime: the conquest of the hearts of the Empire’s capitol. Before arriving in Rome personally, he had written to Christians there, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” (Ro. 12:2). Paul was acutely aware that Italian converts were not spiritually born into a vacuum, but would be affirming a new found faith in Christ and growing to understand what that faith would mean as it was lived out among Rome’s pagan people. In Italy today there is seemingly much evidence of Christianity’s success. Throughout its towns, villages, cities and piazzas Roman Catholics express their religion through festivals and rituals. Some of these forms can be traced back to pre-Christian origins and identified with Roman, Greek, and Etruscan religious ceremony.

This first section of this paper will explore the pre-Christian origins of popular religion in Italy, not with the intent to condescendingly disapprove of the pagan origin of Roman Catholic festivals, but in order to understand these cultural expressions better. This information will furnish an important piece of the anthropological puzzle necessary for effectively relating the Gospel to Italians.² The scope of this paper is not to give an exhaustive

¹ Acts 28:14, *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978). Unless otherwise noted all biblical quotations will be from the NIV.

² Protestants and Catholics both readily admit that Europe is post-Christian and in desperate need of evangelization. Antonie Wessels and World Council of Churches., *Secularized Europe : Who Will Carry Off Its Soul?*, Gospel and Cultures Pamphlet ; 6. (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1996), 2. cf. Pope John Paul II, “Redemptoris Missio,” in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, ed. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 172. “Entire groups of the baptized have lost a living

treatment of the subject, but to offer a number of representative examples that adequately illustrate how ancient beliefs have influenced popular Italian religion. Is this the history of the effective adaptation of Christianity to a new cultural environment? Does it constitute the valid and healthy use of functional substitutes (that is, maintaining cultural forms but changing their meaning)? Or does it represent the diluting, mixing, and compromising of Christ's pure religion with ideas and ways directly opposed to fundamental NT teaching?

After the defining of "popular religion" and a general discussion of its existence and origins in Italy, this research will be divided into four parts.

- (1) What are the pre-Christian origins of sacred times and festivals?
- (2) What are pre-Christian origins of sacred people?
- (3) What do Italian Christians mean by these religious expressions today? What could or should they mean?³
- (4) What are some useful suggestions for re-evangelization so that the living Jesus will reign in the lives of Italians?

This topic is relevant to the courses, "The Phases in the Cultural History of Christianity" and "Christianity in the Non-Western World" in the following ways⁴: (1) The Christianization of Italy in the first eight centuries⁵

sense of the faith or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a 'new evangelization' or a 're-evangelization'."

³ The paper's first section will offer some specific treatment of this question on a case per case basis. The second question will deal with the phenomena in a more general way.

⁴ Admittedly much more to the former than to the later.

⁵ Wessel and Hendrix argue that the evangelization of Europe was not completed until after the Protestant Reformation and Counter Reformation. Wessels and World Council of Churches., 2. Wessel states, "Europe in the Middle Ages was less Christian than is often thought; and at present, perhaps, God is not as dead as is sometimes suggested." Scott Hendrix, "Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization," *Church History* 69 (2000). Hendrix holds that Reformation was a

is the story of the crossing of two cultural boundaries: from Jewish Palestine to the Graeco-Roman world, and from the Graeco-Roman world to the Barbarians (Germanic tribes). (2) Even in its heartland, Europe is not as “Western” as commonly thought. Christianity’s expansion in Southern Europe demonstrates the struggle and tension between Gospel and Culture similar to what has occurred and continues to occur on other continents. (3) Italian popular religion displays remnants of Christianity’s earliest triumphs and defeats. (4) Christianity in Italy has influenced the transmission of the faith in its expansion to other countries. Since Roman Christianity is a synthesis of religions, European missionaries have, at times, exported cultural baggage in evangelizing other cultures.

Definition and Scope

Popular religion and folk Catholicism will be used interchangeably throughout this research. Galilea defines this phenomenon as

The religious expressions, practices, forms and attitudes belonging to vast sectors of Christians who (1) have minimal formal religious education; (2) have achieved a deep symbiosis between their religious and cultural behaviors; (3) emphasize the role of religion with regard to their temporal, material needs.⁶

It must be noted, however, that popular religion in Italy is not limited just to the religiously uneducated. The Italian concept of faith, a mysterious acceptance of what one knows not to be true,⁷ permits all social strata to

crucial stage in the Christianization of Europe. One of its principle struggles was to eradicate the paganism and idolatry that permeated the 16th century church (561, 577).

⁶ Segundo Galilea, “Popular Christian Religiosity,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987), 440.

⁷ Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2000). The writer of this paper owes this definition to a translation of Little’s book in Italian entitled *Perché Credere*. This concept is reinforced in mass every time the believer hears the phrase, “mystery of the faith” or when he/she voices a doubt and is told, “One must accept these things by faith.”

participate in popular religiosity. Smith writes specifically about Italian folk religion. He states that it exists when animism works together with Christianity in an everyday religion separate from the conventional teaching of Roman Catholicism. He maintains that it is a mixture of “primitive Roman religion, imported mystery religions, Roman Catholic forms and animistic folk elements...a belief system that appears to be Christian yet possesses few...Christian notions.”⁸

Popular religion does not necessarily have to be a negative form of faith. Officially the Holy See recognizes the validity of well directed popular religion: “For long seen as less pure, sometimes scorned, these particular expressions of the quest for God and the faith today have become practically everywhere the object of rediscovery.”⁹ The very quest of adapting Christianity to various cultures requires that “forms and practices are assimilated and even reinterpreted in reference to indigenous cultural expression.” Galilea further argues, “Therefore, popular religiosity is not something accidental...it is essential to Christianity as a universal religion.”¹⁰ Those who hold to an evolutionary view of religion and have an “outlook of cultural superiority” assign most of the negative connotations

⁸ Raymond Keith Smith, “Corne and Crucifixes: An Analysis of Animistic Elements in Italian Folk Catholicism” (Dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1999), 9-11.

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" on Evangelisation in the Modern World* (Rome: The Vatican, 8 December 1975), n. 48. cf. International Theological Commission, *Faith and Inculturation* (Rome: The Vatican, December 1987). III,2-7. Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation "Catechesi Tradendae"* (Rome: The Vatican, 16 October 1979). n. 54 states, “Underlying most of these prayers and practises, besides elements that should be discarded, there are other elements which, if they were properly used, could serve very well to help people advance towards knowledge of the mystery of Christ...And why should we appeal to non-Christian elements, refusing to build on elements which, even if they need to be revised and improved, have something Christian at their root?”

¹⁰ Galilea, 440.

associated with “popular religion”.¹¹ Common sense dictates, however, that Christianity can assimilate and adapt to culture to the point that it ceases to be Christian. Religious practices that may be Christian in form or name but are pagan in meaning call for delicate, loving and firm teaching and correction. It is indeed necessary, however, that Christianity communicate through the symbols and forms of people to be successful in its expansion and transformation of Italians.¹²

By design this paper will limit itself to a discussion of sacred festivals and personalities. Myths, legends, magic, superstition, witchcraft, *il malocchio* (the evil eye), and pilgrimages all constitute commonly practiced Italian religiosity but remain outside the scope of this paper. Due to the educational limitations of its author, this work is not a complete sociological treatment of the subject.¹³ The most helpful primary sources are not the writings of the educated and elite scholars and monks of the middle ages who do not fairly represent the commoner but the patrimony of art, archeology and even worship places of the ordinary folk.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Antonie Wessels, *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian?*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press LTD, 1994), 7. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols; Studies in Religious Symbolism* (New York,: Sheed & Ward, 1961).

¹³ For a sociological perspective on Italian folk religion see: Roberto Cipriani, "The Sociology of Religion in Italy," *Sociological Analysis* 51S (1990).; Miriam Castiglione, *I Professionisti dei Sogni* (Napoli: Liguori, 1981); Paolo Giurati, *Devozione a S. Antonio* (Padova: Edizioni Messagero, 1983); Vito Orlando, *Feste, Devozioni e Religiosità* (Galatine: Gongedo Editore, 1981); Carlo Prandi, *La Religione Popolare fra Potere e Tradizione* (Milano: Franco Agnelli, 1983).

¹⁴ For a discussion of the limitations of primary sources for this subject see: Rosalind B. Brooke and Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages : Western Europe, 1000-1300* ([London]: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 61.; Patrick J. Geary, “The Ninth-Century Relic Trade: A Response to Popular Piety?,” in *Religion and the People, 800-1700*, ed. Jim Obelkevich (Chapel Hil: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 8.

Pre-Christian Origins

Popular devotion developed with elements of ancient religion for at least three reasons.¹⁵ (1) At the time of Christianity's conception in Italy, a mixture of religious influences shaped Roman thought and belief. Christianity was one of many religions that vied for the affections of potential Italian believers. Beyond its indigenous forms of Emperor worship and mythology, Romans evaluated whether to accept or reject Greek and Eastern gods and goddesses according to the adaptability of each belief. Rome, for example, was quite suspicious of the Egyptian savior goddess, Isis, because it had no thought category for *metanoia* (repentance). The Zoroastrian cult of Mithras, however, flourished in Rome offering its devotees dozens of shrines throughout the city.¹⁶ In this multi-cultural religious market in which Romans were eclectic shoppers, Christianity offered a unique list of concepts: "charity, sin, heresy, history not myth (revelation rather than mystery), prayer for not to the dead."¹⁷ (2) The legalization of Christianity by Constantine and his successors lead to state sponsored attacks on paganism. These beliefs merely went underground and reemerged under Christian names and forms. These years following Constantine can in fact be described as pendulum swings from outlawed paganism under Christian rule to freedom and state sponsored pagan worship. Closely associated with this cause was the influence of Constantine himself. He stands to represent as a microcosm what happened to Christianity among the masses during that period: he was Christian in

¹⁵ Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 200. Jones suggests that the "resurgence of humanist classicism began to reinstate the pagan gods and goddesses."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53-59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

name but pagan at heart. Jones and Pennick also demonstrate that during this period of legalization,

"The 'Sunday Observance' laws of 321 forbade all but essential work on that day, not described as the Sabbath, as in Jewish usage, nor as the day of the resurrection of Jesus, as Christian understanding now has it, but simply as the 'Venerable Day of the Sun'. In 326 Constantine gave the shrine of the Helios Apollo in Nero's circus to the Christians for the foundation of their new church of St. Peter."¹⁸

(3) Church leaders failed to transform pagan practices into Christian worship. The writings of the church fathers denouncing or simply bewailing pagan practices among Christians demonstrate that the “common people remained pagan in fact if not in theory.”¹⁹ “The new forms of popular devotion were either directly encouraged by priests and friars, or at any event were not in overt conflict with them.”²⁰ Monter assesses the churches’ role in the development of popular religion in this way:

"A numerous clergy, trying to administer rituals accurately but not to explain their meaning, preaching about morality rather than dogma, lived among a population which was both devout and indiscriminating about the boundaries between the sacred and the profane."²¹

Sacred Times and Festivals

A careful comparison of three Italian modern Catholic festivals, locally and nationally, reveals many similarities with ancient Etruscan and Roman religious practice in symbol and meaning. This research will first look at an ancient description Etruscan religion in Gubbio, describe its present day annual festival and compare and contrast the two in order to determine if a valid connection exists. Next this paper will trace the

¹⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹⁹ Ibid., 73.

²⁰ William Monter, *Ritual, Myth and Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984), 6.

²¹ Ibid., 9.

festivities of Christmas and Carnival back to their Roman origins of Saturnalia and Mithraism.

The Running and Elevation of the *Ceri* (Statues) at Gubbio

Located in the central Umbrian region of Italy, Gubbio stands as an extraordinary example of how Etruscan religion (dating to the fourth and fifth centuries BC) is an evident backdrop to an Italian village's religious processions today. Seven bronze tablets, two in an Umbrian variation of Latin and five in the Etruscan alphabet, were discovered here in 1444. The tablets date to the second and third centuries B.C. but their description of the religious liturgy of a priestly brotherhood is even more ancient. Beyond the recounting of Gubbio's yearly feast, these inscriptions also contain sections on spells and imprecations against arch enemies.²²

The most interesting and relevant content of these tablets describes in its longest and most important section the ordinances for a yearly festivity (celebrated in the month of May) and procession. There were five stages in this procession: (1) a warning for members of unwanted tribes to depart (or be thrown off a cliff); (2) the sanctification and gathering of the town's people by proper division; (3) the reading of omens to ascertain that the time was appropriate; (4) the sacrifice of victims (generally of sheep and other animals) carried in cages on an elaborate framework of two-storied elevated

²² Luciano Zeppego, *Guida All'italia Leggendaria, Misteriosa, Insolita, Fantastica* ([Milano],: A. Mondadori, 1971), 323. Readers of German can find a translation in Ambros Josef Pfiffig, *Religio Iguvina; Philologische Und Religionsgeschichtliche Studien Zu Den Tabulae Iguvinae* (Wien,: H. Böhlau Nachf.; Kommissionsverlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1964). Photographs and summaries in Italian can be found in Arduino Colasanti, *Gubbio; Con 114 Illustrazioni* (Bergamo,: Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1905), 18-19. For an archeological and literary analysis of their content see: Caroline Malone, Simon Stoddart, and Francesco Allegrucci, *Territory, Time, and State : The Archaeological Development of the Gubbio Basin* (Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

platforms; and (5) the conclusion of the festival with an enormous banquet. At the conclusion of the festival, citizens voted on the success of the event. In the event that poor organization or proper preparation dampened the success of the feast, the town fined the responsible stewards. During the procession, participants offered a series of three prayers to three deities (the first masculine, the later feminine): Cerfus Martius, Praestita (appeased in exchange for help or food) and Tursa (especially known to frighten people).²³

History verifies that, at least since the twelfth century A.D.²⁴, the citizens of Gubbio have held a “Christian” annual festival and procession on the fifteenth of May in honor of their patron saint, St. Ubaldo. At the climax of the festival, townspeople enthusiastically cheer for three groups of men who carry at breakneck speed the statues of St. Ubaldo, St. George, and St. Antonio to the top of mount Igino. Each of the saints, mounted atop two-tiered octagonal towers on a large wooden frame, represents differing professions: *Muratori* (brick layers/builders), *Negozianti* (shop keepers), and *Contadini* (farmers) respectively.²⁵

A comparison and analysis of this festival reveals some elements common to both the ancient Etruscan procession and today’s “Running of the *Ceri*.” The time of the year is the same being in the month of May. The fact that groups gather around an object of veneration according to their class or profession is also similar. One should not make too much, however,

²³ Robert Seymour Conway, *Ancient Italy and Modern Religion* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1933), 6.

²⁴ Piero Luigi Menichetti, *I Ceri Di Gubbio Dal Xii Secolo* (Citta di Castello: Rubini and Petrucci, 1982).

²⁵ Conway, 7-10. For an updated a thorough description of this festival see: <http://www.gubbio.com>; http://www.bellaumbria.net/Gubbio/festa_ceri_eng.htm; and <http://www.traveleurope.it/gubbceri.htm>.

of the banquet feasting which occurs in both celebrations, since Italians habitually do this at nearly every occasion. Numbers play an important role in both. There are two processions in each and there also seems to be some possible carry over from the ancient to the new in the stopping at houses to drink wine and pray for the blessing of one's host. The *macchine* (machines) that carried the sacrifices in the old and the statues in the new are both in two levels. According to Conway, there also seems to be some similarity in their shapes.²⁶ The objects of their affections are local. Praestita and Tursa are known only at Gubbio and their modern counterparts are dedicated to the patron saints of local occupations. These deities have identities of their own and their devotees want to make them move, run and dance.²⁷ Conway also suggests that their processions share a common religious value:

Everybody can join in, everybody can watch, everybody can enjoy the dances and the dresses... but somewhere behind all these obvious attractions there does definitely lie the conception that the object of worship is in relation to other people than his or her priest, and to more of the world than is contained in the most gorgeous altar or the most hallowed shrine.²⁸

Finally, there seems to be some parallel between the two in the housing of the machinery and the statues in a shrine for safe keeping until the festival of the next year. Interestingly enough, despite these affinities of the modern Gubbio "Running of the *Ceri*," no one but Conway associates the festival with the ancient Etruscan texts. Others who trace the origins of the modern festival, generally attribute the *Ceri* to the ancient worship of some other pagan god such as *Ceres*.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., 10.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 20-21.

²⁹ http://www.bellaumbria.net/Gubbio/festa_ceri_eng.htm;

<http://www.gubbio.com/ceri/storiaus.html>; Marcellin Pellet, "Le Paganisme En Italie: La Procession De Saint Ubold à Gubbio," *Revue bleue* 25, no. 1888 (1888).

Several significant differences also exist between the ancient and modern festivals. First, the gender of the deities is different. In the modern festival, Italians honor three masculine saints but the Etruscan rite elevates one masculine and two feminine deities.³⁰ Secondly, the ancient worshippers approached their objects of adoration more for the purpose of doing harm to their enemies than to ask their favor or blessing. The modern festival is nearly entirely positive in nature. Participants seek protection, a good harvest, and success in their business. Thirdly, the modern day observance contains dozens of traditions that have absolutely no parallel in the Iguvine Tablets. At the time of the mounting the *Ceri*, for example, water from three decorated pitchers is splashed on the wooden framework and the octagonal prisms with a dual purpose. First, this “baptism” is performed for good luck; and secondly, and more practically to make the wood expand so the *Ceri* can be slotted in more firmly.³¹

So what do today’s religious Eugubines mean by their ritual each May 15th? The ceremonies would seem to have the following functions or meanings: (1) This ceremony definitely serves a religious function as Gubbio’s citizens desire to express faith in and find favor with the divine. At 8:00 AM all activities are preceded by a celebration of mass at St. Francis of Peace. The procession passes the cemetery where dignitaries lay a wreath of flowers in memory of dead *ceraioli* (those who run the *Ceri*). The festival starts with the distribution of little bunches of flowers put together by the nuns from the convent of St. Anthony. The very honoring of the particular saints is in hopes that their devotions will earn them grace, protection, and a

³⁰ Conway offers a lengthy response to this objection. In summary he states that the goddesses represent concepts that are neither male or feminine, 21-22.

³¹ <http://www.members.it.tripod.de/Caino/index-9.html>.

greater hearing. (2) The feast serves to maintain communal identity and unity. Every town citizen is involved with the feast in some way. On the eve of St. Ubaldo's day, after the striking of the *Campanone* (the city's large civic bell), people begin to gather in the streets and *piazze* and every opportunity is taken to drink and to socialize. All accompany the procession and all continue to cheer at every new event of the procession. At the christening of the wooden framework, the water pitchers are thrown down, and the children scramble to gather the pieces of pottery as good luck charms. The procession in Italy is itself a call for all citizens to show their solidarity by coming out of their houses and walking together with those marching. "The tradition has been carried down through the centuries without a break, except for the year 1941." During both world wars, soldiers who found themselves far from Gubbio, constructed makeshift *Ceri* and continued the tradition.³² (3) The run to the top of the hill serves as an exhibition of manhood. Though there are no official winners in the race, each team takes pride in running up, as fast as possible, the city's steepest incline without damaging its enthroned saint. Each group adorns itself and identifies itself with colorful scarves and shirts. The three running teams also form a hierarchy of honor. The captains ride out in front of the procession on horses and the *capodieci* (heads of ten) are honored by the teams they lead. Apparently, the rank and tenure of the captains and *capodieci* mirrors even the hierarchy of the three saints. Although the three groups race to the top of the hill, none of them ever overtakes the other and St. Ubaldo always wins, followed by St. George and St. Anthony. (4) This tradition has more recently served to bring international attention to Gubbio. The festivity, therefore,

³² <http://www.traveleurope.it/gubbiceri.htm>.

creates a sense of pride in the community as having its own unique ancient tradition. In conclusion, with the exception of looking to a patron saint for protection and welfare, it would seem that very little if any pagan meaning has survived through the centuries in this tradition.³³

Christmas and Carnival

In ancient Rome and among Germanic peoples the feast of Saturnalia and the god Mithras contributed to the development of a series of rituals and festivals that began at the end of December and lasted through the arrival of Spring. An examination of the customs and beliefs of Saturnalia and Mithras will uncover their eventual role in the celebration of Christmas and Carnival in Italian folk Catholicism.

Toward the end of the first century A.D., Mithraism, a Zoroastrian religion from the Persia, began to make its appearance in Italy. Reserved for “men only,” the cult focused its attention on the sun god Mithras and was characterized by “darkness, secrecy, dramatic lighting effects, and magic.”³⁴ “Mithra [was] essentially a deity of light: he [drew] the sun with rapid horses.”³⁵ His followers sought strength as soldiers and practiced sexual abstinence. Levels of initiation corresponded with the levels of the heavenly spheres and the killing of the bull was symbolic of the god Mithras’ making

³³ Conway argues at length that Etruscan religion influenced the doctrine of the Trinity. "Did not this Italian habit, of recognising special functions in special divine entities, contribute at least some of the material to the great edifice of belief, perhaps the most imposing ever set up by that force of speculative reason called, I believe, Constructive Theology, an edifice built into its final shape by the philosophers of the Roman Church, the doctrine of the Trinity, the conception of a Supreme Being who is, in a mystic sense, Three as well as One, and One as well as Three?", 24.

³⁴ Arnaldo Momigliano, “Roman Religion: The Imperial Period,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987), 466.

³⁵ Gherardo Gnoli, “Mithra,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987), 579.

a sacrifice. Early church fathers called it a demonic imitation of Christianity.³⁶ His birthday was celebrated on December 25th. Mithraism appealed greatly to the European who found the days of winter getting longer and longer and feared the total disappearance of the sun. It was in such a climate that pagans began to celebrate winter Solstice (December 25th) as the day of the sun's return and Mithras was a natural choice for their worship.

What were Christians to do with such a widespread and popular set of beliefs? History indicates that they took these pagan beliefs and tried to raise them to a higher level. They found a basis for this idea in Scripture: “at a very early date Christ was likened to the sun, especially the rising sun.”³⁷ In Luke Zechariah called the coming Messiah “the rising sun”. John described Jesus as “a light that shines in darkness.” And one should not forget that a bright star was seen at the time of Christ's birth.³⁸ The church in Europe eventually sought to make a clear connection “between Christian festivals and already existing Roman and Celtic ‘sacred times’ ... [so that] since the fourth century, Christmas has been 25 December, the festival of the ‘birth of the invincible son’ (Mithras).”³⁹ According to Birlea, the church “was content to give them [these holidays] a more or less Christian veneer, since it was impossible to eliminate them entirely.” Initially, Christians such as Origen resisted assigning a day for the birth of Christ. They reasoned that the only biblical references to the celebration of birthdays were of evil men like Herod. Though he condemned the practice of giving gifts on the

³⁶ Ibid., Jones and Pennick, 59. [Tertullian, 1975 #110 @196-197]; *Prescription Against Heretics*, 493.

³⁷ Wessels, *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian?*, 42.

³⁸ Luke 1:78-79; John 1:5; Matthew 2:2.

birthday of the sun, Augustine held that Christ was born on that day because it was the day of the year when the sun returned. The motive for adopting December 25th by Christian leaders seems to have been the conversion of the festival of Mithraism into a Christian feast.⁴⁰

There are some obvious parallels between the ancient celebration to Mithras on December 25th and the popular Italian tradition of Christmas. First, the twelve days between the 25th and January 6th were thought, given the darkness, to be days during which the devil was particularly capable of acting out his evil ways. Today, Christmas is a festival of lights. Cities and towns spend large portions of their municipal budgets on lighting various quarters and precincts with the images of angels, the Madonna, and the respective saints. Secondly, the period served as a transitional period of waiting for the old to pass and the new to come. Today as in ancient times, people refrain from work and give themselves to socializing and feasting. It is a time to be with family and to make visits to all relatives and friends to give *auguri* (best wishes).⁴¹ Thirdly, the theme of awaiting the coming of deity is present in both. *Presepi* (nativity scenes) of all sizes, some actually living, are elaborately constructed in homes, yards, churches, and town squares. The manger remains empty until Christmas morning, when the baby Jesus magically appears. Fourthly, in ancient times, given the fear that the sun would disappear altogether, candles would be lit and a fire would be kept burning all night long. Many different noises from bells, drums and eventually guns were made with the intent to scare away evil spirits. Today,

³⁹ Wessels and World Council of Churches, *Secularized Europe : Who Will Carry Off Its Soul?*, 25.

⁴⁰ Conway, 127.

the Christmas air is filled with music, bells and the resounding boom of large fireworks. Finally, then, the people attached some green plant to their hat to signify the coming of spring.⁴² Now, Italians adorn their houses with plants and live Christmas trees. Many families plant their Christmas tree in their own yards, or if they are city dwellers they find a place in the country where they can keep the tree alive.⁴³ These are all examples of common elements that survive in different regions of Italy.

Most Italians resist and denounce the materialism and consumerism of Christmas out of the conviction that this is indeed a religious holiday. In most towns, another day such as December 12th, Santa Lucia, or January 6th, the *Befana*, is used for showering children with toys and goodies. At the solemn event of midnight on Christmas eve, Italian families gather for mass to pray and seek God's presence in the passage of this mysterious and mystic moment. Though pagan forms have changed and transformed themselves, the basic meaning and function of the holiday remains: the seeking of divine light and favor to ward off the impending darkness of the future.

It is in examining the Roman celebrations of Saturnalia that one can begin to see the clear connection of Italian Carnival with Christmas. During the Roman feasts of Saturn (at the end of December beginning of January) in which people exchanged gifts, normal everyday life and roles were turned upside down and reversed. The feasts were famous for their great depravity

⁴¹ Perhaps the wealth of *auguri* and the urgency of getting these best wishes out to all loved ones is directly related to the ancient fears of this precarious and dark time of year.

⁴² Ovidiu Birlea, "Folklore," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987), 365-366.. See also Geary, 11.

⁴³ For some this is a matter of tradition and almost of ritual. Others plant their trees for ecological reasons but always with the idea of being kind to "Mother Earth" in hopes that destiny will be kinder to the family.

when servants were allowed to eat with their owners and even insult them. The people elected a “King of Chaos” who was allowed to give absurd and unusual orders. According to Goldwasser,

...these cycle rituals of disorder and rebellion show themselves incapable of administering real life because they foster the confusion of roles, licentiousness, and the mockery of power; they thus serve as a reminder of the necessity for order, which is reestablished at their conclusion.⁴⁴

Her theory is that once a year the Romans would create such disorder and chaos that people would desire and appreciate the orderly world in which they normally lived. She also points to a study by Mikhail Bakhtin that surveys the role of laughter in social order and its connection with religion. “The Church adapted the time of Christian feasts to local pagan celebrations (in view of their christianization), and these celebrations were linked to cults of laughter.”⁴⁵ These cults served as safety valve⁴⁶ to release tensions that develop between those in power and those under them. This connection explains the prominent theme of “inversion” in Carnival: men dressing like women, the wearing of clothes inside out, the religious or saintly dressing as devils.

The Feast of Fools “took place in churches between Christmas and Epiphany, this festival was both an extreme satire of the mannerism and more of the court and the high church.”⁴⁷ The Feast of Fools was celebrated right up to the time of the Reformation when its opponents were finally successful in extinguishing it. As late as 1444, however, even some

⁴⁴ Maria Julia Goldwasser, "Carnival," *Encyclopedia of Religion* 3 (1987)3:99.

⁴⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 76.

⁴⁶ Romulus Vulcanescu, “Masks: Ritual Masks in European Cultures,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987) 9:274.

⁴⁷ Goldwasser, 99.

theologians argued that “the wine of human madness must have an outlet at least once a year in order to transform itself into the good wine of pious devotion.”⁴⁸

Goethe summarizes the genius of the Roman pre-cursor to Christian Carnival with these words:

The Roman Carnival was not simply a pleasant spectacle, a joyful amusement, an aesthetic experience bringing exhilaration to the spirit...[it was] unmistakably authentic, not given to the people but by the people to themselves, and because of that a mirror of culture and a metaphor of life itself. The crowded streets suggested to the great poet the ways of the world, where "freedom and equality can only be enjoyed in the tumult of folly" and where pleasures are as fleeting as the Palio horses.⁴⁹

In time, Saturnalia and the Feast of Fools evolved into Italy’s most popular festival: Carnival. It is especially in this celebration that one must critically ask, “Did Christianity conqueror paganism, or was it conquered?” In Italy today it attracts more participation from young and old alike than Christmas and Easter combined. Though scholars would beg to differ on the etymology of “Carnival”⁵⁰, Italians frequently exclaim it to be: “*Carne-vale*” or “The flesh is worthwhile” as if to say, “long live the flesh!” Not far from his home, the author of this paper once heard the parish priest cheer on and rile up the crowds of all the citizens of Casazza declaring, “Carnevale means, ‘to God the flesh!’ In this celebration we offer up our fleshly side to God.” In this, at least, Italians may have changed the name of Saturnalia but

⁴⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “The Roman Carnival,” in *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, ed. Alessandro Falassi (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 13-14.

⁵⁰ “The etymological roots of the name Canrival may be the Latin *caro* (meat) and *levara* (to remove, to take away), which in Latin became *carne levamen* and afterward *carne vale*.” Goldwasser, 98.

much of its meaning has survived. Another modern proverb for Carnival is “*A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale*” (At Carnival every joke is a good one).

Today, the most intense celebrations begin three days before the forty day *quaresima* (lent), when Italians seek to live out all their desires and revelry. *Sfogarsi* (to unburden the heart, to get something off one’s chest, or to vent feelings) is an extremely important aspect to Italian culture. Italians believe that emotions must not be bottled up and kept inside where they will rot and fester; they must be aired and vented in order to have a healthy soul. Before giving up wine, meat or some other favorite food to which Italians are affectionately attached, they feast and make merry to enjoy just one more time⁵¹ before Ash Wednesday and the religious period of fasting in preparation for Easter. Even in this, the basic purpose of Saturnalia is maintained. The joking culture of Carnival creates the need and appreciation for order. For the Italian, it is the essential breaking up of the monotony of every day life.

Children and adults take to the streets in costume and parade through the streets and *piazze* of their cities. The costume allows them to become someone different and to show a different side of themselves. This use of costumes is a vestige of the religious elite’s attempt to tame and transform the holiday. Rich patrons subsidized the building of carriages and floats for parades and “the introduction of masked balls in the sixteenth century in Italy was the first step on the festival’s path to a predominantly poetic character.”⁵² The *Commedia dell’arte* lent characters to the festival. Pantaloon, the Doctor, and the more popular figures of Harlequin,

⁵¹ Some villages, like the author of this paper lived in (Bergamo, Italy), actually have a break halfway through *quaresima* because, after all, only Jesus was perfect and divine enough to control himself for forty days.

Colombine and Pucinella were masks or costumes that allowed participants to satirically poke fun at various people in Italian society. They represented the rich and greedy, the drunkard, the boastful, the ignorant rural boy, the conniving maidservant, and the sly clown. In Florence songs gave way to the “ridiculous—and usually censored—side of social conventions.” As sponsors, the *Medici* encouraged the use of these songs (of the goldsmith, the poor, young wives, old husbands, etc.) on beautifully decorated floats.

Venice developed the festival along two different social strata. The *Dogi* celebrated with seriousness and order while its poorer quarters battled out their rival hostilities and even sacrificed a bull. “Another element of Venetian Carnival was the flight of a man on ropes to the top of the campanile of Saint Mark’s since Carnival was also a time to challenge and exorcise the forces of nature.” The Carnival in Rome featured a “complex symbolism of violence, death and resurrection.” Masked parties and parades lead up to Tuesday’s conclusion with a candlelight procession while shouting, “Death to him who has no candle.” They would playfully attempt to extinguish each other’s candles as an expression of their inner most fears of death.⁵³

The elements of violence lessened: fighting, verbal abuse, and the various forms of mock aggression—water jets, the hurling of oranges, plaster confetti—gradually gave way to battles of flowers and colored paper confetti that were the new and prominent aspect of nineteenth-century street Carnival.⁵⁴

If two centuries ago the trend was toward less violence, the trend has been reversing in the last fifty years. For fear of the more dangerous antics of the *ragazzacci* (hooligans), Parents dare not take their small children out during

⁵² Goldwasser, 100.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the most intense concluding moments of Carnival. In the majority of Italian towns today, celebrants take to the streets with the objective of taking out their *cattiveria* (meanness) on friends and strangers. It is difficult, if not impossible to survive the festivities without getting one's clothes entirely full of confetti, being squirted numerous times with shaving cream or *stelle filanti* (aerosol shooting string), and getting hammered on the head with noise-making malets.

Vestiges of Saturnalia are more obvious in rural carnivals like that of Campania. Moving through three stages they

Begin on Saint Anthony's Day when a youth carries a flame, accompanied by a fiendish animal from the medieval bestiary. During this same period, pyres of useless household objects are lit in the streets. The second stage features a pageant of maskers riding asses and symbolizing the months of the year. The third stage is marked by the pageant of the Death of Carnival, represented by a masked youth carried through the village in a coffin. All three stages symbolize the struggle between the moral and the immoral, joy and sadness, life and death.⁵⁵

In rural Sicily it is considered the most important of all family gatherings. They have a proverb: "Easter and Christmas (spend) with whom you will, The last days with your own folks." The "last days" refer to the days of Carnival. Salmone-Marino picturesquely describes it this way:

Before each door, in the crossroads, in the squares, we see peasants of all ages, in groups or alone, still or moving in all kinds of ways; they gesticulate, yell, laugh heartily, hoot, and make many indecent noises. From group to group, from individual to individual, from one who is standing to passerby minding their business, are cast the liveliest exchanges of witty remarks, pungent digs, stinging remarks and insults...⁵⁶

On the surface it would seem that Italian Carnival is little more than a nationwide party. Yet in its symbolism, in acts and costumes, the festival reveals the expression of deeper existential needs to deal with life's

⁵⁵ Vulcanescu., 274.

oppression and fears. The joking culture of Carnival creates the need and appreciation for order. The festival is an outlet to release inner hostilities. It is a mockery of death and social mores. It is a vacation from piety in preparation for a period of greater worship and closeness to God.

In its second major part, this paper will discuss the relation of modern sacred people with ancient counterparts, the meaning of popular religion today and suggestions for an effective evangelization of Italy.

⁵⁶ Salvatore Salomone-Marino and Rosalie N. Norris, *Customs and Habits of the Sicilian Peasants* (London: Associated Press, 1981), 153.

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