

**July 28, 2013**

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

### **The Witness of Christian Hymnography**

After the words of Jesus himself, the texts of Christian hymnography seem to provide our earliest sources of Christian theology. The Apostolica—the New Testament writings—bear witness to the existence of such hymns (cf. Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 14:15,26; Ephesians 5:19; 3:16; James 5:23).

An obvious feature of hymns renders them especially valuable in the history of theology. Namely, the words of hymns are set; they don't change. Consequently, when we find traces of Christian hymns in the New Testament literature, the discovery is particularly precious; we know that we are dealing with material earlier than the New Testament itself.

Indeed, this is true generally of liturgical texts; some expressions and formulas used in the setting of worship tend to remain stable after they have fallen from common speech, and even from preaching. A single example must suffice to demonstrate what I mean: the use of the Greek noun *pais* ("servant" and "child") to refer to Jesus.

Although the noun *pais*, as a reference to Jesus, was part of the apostolic preaching (cf. Acts 3:13,26), it is instructive to observe that St. Paul, the New Testament's earliest author, never uses the word. During the twenty years separating Peter's first sermons from Paul's first epistles, the usage had apparently ceased to be common.

But not entirely; references to Jesus as God's *pais* continued to be voiced on those occasions when Christians prayed. It is an attested fact that Christians do not readily change the words of their prayers, not did they change this one.

With respect to Jesus as God's *pais*, its place in worship (cf. Acts 4:30) was widely and long maintained. Near the end of the first century, for instance, Clement of Rome referred to Jesus as God's *pais* three times as a prayer formula (First Clement 59). In the *Didache*, a first-century document from Syria, this usage is found in two prayers (9.3, 10.2-3). In Asia Minor during the next century Jesus was called God's *pais* in the final

prayer of Polycarp of Smyrna (The Martyrdom of Polycarp 14.1). At the dawn of the third century, again in Rome, the identical usage is found in prayers preserved by Hippolytus (Apostolic Tradition 3, 4, 8).

This evidence supports the impression of a reluctance of Christians to change the formulas of their prayer. In the instance under consideration—*país*—a primitive Christological reference, drawn from the Greek text of Isaiah (42:1; 50:10; 52:13; cf. Matthew 12:18), remained tenaciously stable in the worship, notwithstanding various changes in the expressions of Christology otherwise.

If the disposition to verbal stability is a common trait of Christian worship generally, this trait becomes quite imperative with respect to hymnography; since hymns are sung by groups, their words can't readily be altered!

The presence of quoted hymnography is usually discerned in its material and formal components; hymnic features will generally stand out from the circumambient ambient text, whether by particular points of vocabulary and/or strophic indications. When a prose-writing apostle unexpectedly breaks into a bit of metric form, this is a promising sign he is quoting a Christian hymn. That impression may be further confirmed if the material contains expressions unusual in the writer's style.

A commonly recognized example is contained in 1 Timothy 3:14-16:

Hoping to come to you quickly, I am writing you these things—in case I am delayed—so that you may know what sort of behavior is expected in the house of God, which is the living God's Church, the pillar and base of the truth. Indeed, great in its confession is the mystery of our religion,  
    manifest in the flesh,  
    justified in the Spirit,  
    beheld by angels,  
    preached unto the Gentiles,  
    believed on in the world,  
    received up into glory.

The Greek text of the latter part of this passage is formed of six metric lines with sustained recourse to parallelism and assonance. Read as either

three couplets or a twin set of terza rima, the selection certainly comes from a Christian hymn.

Viewed individually, the components of these lines do not logically advance Paul's argument in this section of the epistle. What we have here, rather, is a text brought to Paul's mind by his reference to "the living God's Church" as "the pillar and base of the truth." According to the unusual adverb Paul uses (homologoumenos), this truth pertains to the Church's "confession," its homologia. This confession voices the substance of the mysterion of the "religion" (evsebeia) confessed in the "household of God." Finally, in testimony to his view of the Church, Paul invokes these six lines of hymnic confession well known to Timothy.

What, then, does Paul mean to say? The message is not complicated, I think: A "pillar" or "base" holds up something—it gives support to something—in this case, the truth of the Gospel. This truth of the Gospel, Paul has in mind to demonstrate, is proclaimed in the Church's hymnography. That is to say, Paul is appealing to the authority of a hymn in order to illustrate his account of the Church as "the pillar and base of the truth." The Church, he says, confesses that mega mysterion in its hymnography.

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