

March 9, 2014  
First Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings  
The Axis of the Cross

I take as obvious the important comment of Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, “the central axis of the New Testament is Christ’s self-offering of himself to the Father out of his condition as man.”

Perhaps this observation is clearest if we bear in mind the chronological priority of the Pauline epistles as the original core of the New Testament. The four narrative Gospels—the NT books first taken up, one suspects, by the average reader—were composed later than the epistles and reflect, in some respects, a more developed theology. That is to say, the written Gospels contain sundry aspects and interests, of which little is explicitly declared in the letters of Paul; consider, for example, how seldom—if ever—Paul quotes the words of Jesus.

It is a fact that the Church received the “Gospel of Paul” before she received those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Paul’s letters were being read aloud in the services of the Church before the first Evangelist (Mark, evidently) dipped his pen.

Even today, the order of our services reflects the chronological priority of Paul’s letters; we always read the Epistle of the day before we read the Gospel. This sequence, derived from primitive liturgical history, preserves what I suspect to be an implicit pastoral preference; it puts the congregation into a Pauline frame-of-mind, as it were, to prepare for the narratives of the Four Evangelists. Paul’s preoccupation with the mystery of the Cross, which Leiva-Merikakis calls “an all-determining axis,” establishes in the worshipping congregation the mental context appropriate to the theophanic arrival of Christ in the Gospel reading.

Because Paul’s letters—with the possible exception of the Epistle of Saint James—are the earliest writings of the New Testament, he is sometimes called the Church’s first theologian. This designation is appropriate, I believe, in the sense that Paul is our earliest extant writer of Christian theology.

On the other hand, Paul's historical priority among the apostolic writings also renders it extremely important that his letters be correctly understood. I mean by this: To misunderstand Paul is to misunderstand the Christian faith as such. And misunderstandings of this Apostle go back a very long way, as Saint Peter testified (2 Peter 3:14-16). In fact, even Saint Paul complained that he was misunderstood (Romans 3:8)!

Misinterpretations of Saint Paul account for some of the earliest heresies the Church was obliged to combat. In the second century the worst misunderstanding of Paul was that of Marcion. I rarely think of Marcion without remembering what Franz Overbeck, a century ago, said of St. Paul: "He has had only one student who understood him, Marcion—and he misunderstood him!" (Er habe nur einen Schüler gehabt, der ihn verstanden habe, Marcion--und dieser habe ihn missverstanden!)

Marcion's misinterpretation of Paul, nonetheless, forced the Catholic Christians of the second century to reflect deeply and critically about the problems of biblical interpretation and how to resolve them. Largely in reaction to Marcion they insisted that the writings of the Apostles were best understood in the local churches that the Apostles themselves had founded, not by latecomers claiming some special and rather private knowledge of the apostolic mind.

With respect to St. Paul, the Catholics of the second century observed that he conferred an inherited doctrinal authority on the ministers ordained to succeed his teaching ministry in the local churches. Paul did not tell them, "in case of a doctrinal dispute, just study my epistles very carefully, using grammars, dictionaries and the latest exegetical theories, and that should clear up the difficulty."

He said, rather, "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopous), to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:28-30).

The second century Catholics believed they were seeing exactly that crisis of doctrine in their own lifetime. They regarded Marcion as one of the wolves against which St. Paul had warned them (cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* 3.14.2).

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