

April 19, 2015
Saint Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings Ignatius & the Tradition

The primitive creedal form quoted in the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans—“[God’s] Son, who as it pertains to the flesh came into existence by means of the seed of David; who as it pertains to the Spirit of Holiness was appointed Son-of-God-in-power by means of the resurrection from among the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord”—is echoed repeatedly in classical texts of Christology.

Arguably first are the references in the corpus of Ignatius, the second Bishop of Antioch., who uses those creedal formulas several times to expound the physical reality of the Incarnation. He declares, for instance, “our God, Jesus Christ, according to God’s dispensation (*kat’ oikonomian Theou*), was carried in Mary’s womb, from the seed of David, by the Holy Spirit” (*Ephesians* 18.2).

This text introduces Ignatius’s sustained refutation of the Docetists, who taught that God’s Son only *appeared* (*dokein*) to be human. He continues the theme of the Incarnation by speaking paradoxically of “three loud secrets”—*tria mysteria kravges!* These are, Ignatius writes, Mary’s virginal conception, the true identity of her Son, and the salvific efficacy of his death.

“The prince of this world” (*ton archonata tou aionos toutou*), being ignorant of the three mysteries “accomplished in God’s silence,” was duped with respect to the true power of the Incarnation (19.1). In other words, the devil was a sort of Docetist.

According to Ignatius, the very idea of the Incarnation meant that Jesus *had to be* both divine and human, both eternal and historical, “God manifested humanly (*Theou anthropinos phaneromenou*) for the newness of eternal life” (19.3).

Even as he wrote these words, Ignatius hoped to compose a “second book” —doubtless in more detail and at greater length—this *oikonomia* regarding “the new Man (*ton kainon Athropon*), Jesus Christ, in his faith

and in his love, in his Passion and Resurrection.” Once again reverting to the ancient creedal form we saw in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Ignatius speaks of “Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David (*ek genous David*) according to the flesh, being both the Son of man and the Son of God”(20.1-2).

Within days of writing this letter to the church at Ephesus, this pastoral and theological preoccupation of Ignatius appears in what he wrote to the believers in Magnesia, declaring that they had “attained to full conviction (*peplerophoresthai*) in regard to the birth, and Passion, and Resurrection which took place during the government of Pontius Pilate, being truly and certainly accomplished by Jesus Christ, who is our hope, from which may no one of you ever be turned aside” (*Magnesians* 11) .

Ignatius continues this theme in the message he sent to the church at Tralles at about the same time:

Deafen yourselves, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with (*choris*) Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David (*ek genous David*), and also of Mary; who was truly born, and ate and drank. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified and died, as beings looked on—heavenly, earthly, and sub-earthly. He was also truly raised from the dead, his Father raising him up, even as in the same manner his Father will so raise us up, who believe in him, by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life (*Trallians* 9:1-2).

These same creedal formulas also appear in Ignatius’s letter to the Christians at Smyrna, whom he praises as

having attained an immovable faith, as though nailed, in both flesh and spirit, to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and established in love through the blood of Christ, firmly convinced (*peplerophoremous*), with respect to our Lord, that he was truly of the family of David according to the flesh (*ek genous David kata sarka*), and the Son of God according to the will and power of God, that he was truly born of a virgin, was baptized by John (so that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him), and was truly, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch, crucified for us in his flesh, by the fruit of which we exist through his divinely-blessed passion,

that he might set up a standard for all ages, through his resurrection (*Smyrnaeans* 1.1-2).

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