

TEACHING THE TRUTH AND DEFENDING THE FAITH: Theological Themes in the Hymns of St. Ambrose

Joel D. Otto

St. Augustine described St. Ambrose of Milan (340–397) as “a faithful teacher of the Church, and even at the risk of his life a most strenuous defender of Catholic truth.”¹ His sermons for both catechumens and the recently baptized demonstrate how seriously he took the bishop’s task of teaching the faith to the people.² In so doing, and through various writings, he also defended his people from the threat of heresy.

A specific incident in his battles against heresy provided the catalyst for introducing and employing a new tool in the teaching of the truth and defense of the faith. Justina, the mother of the boy emperor Valentinian, was an Arian. She demanded that the Arians in Milan be given permission to use the Portian basilica for Easter in 386. Ambrose and a group of his congregants barricaded themselves in the basilica until the crisis passed. In order to give encouragement and foster unity, the bishop had his people sing.³

Hymn singing became a part of the worship life in Milan with the four-line, eight-stanza hymns of Ambrose serving as the core repertoire. Soon hymn singing became a part of worship throughout the Western Church.⁴ Ambrose was simply borrowing a practice from the Eastern Church and improving on the earlier efforts of Hilary of Poitiers; as John Moorhead says, “Compared with Hilary’s rambling

¹Quoted in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 10, Ambrose: Select Works and Letters* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994, reprint), xiv.

²For example, *On the Mysteries* was a collection of sermons preached during Lent to prepare the catechumens who would be baptized during the Easter Vigil.

³This story is told by numerous authors, for example, Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 148; A. S. Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 16-17; Vincent Lenti, “Saint Ambrose: The Father of Western Hymnody,” *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 48:4 (October 1997), 44.

⁴Lenti comments: “Saint Ambrose was the first person to successfully introduce to the Western Church the practice of singing metrical hymns” (44).

periods, the hymns of Ambrose operate as sequences of catchy sound bites.⁵ Ambrose intended those “catchy sound bites” to teach and unite the people. He explained the purpose of employing hymns in the worship life of the Milan churches in addressing critics of his hymns.

They also say that the people have been mesmerized by the poetical force of my hymns. I have no inclination at all to deny that. Great is this poetry and more powerful than anything else, for what could be more powerful than the confession of the Trinity which is daily being hailed by the mouth of all the people? They rival one another in the confession of their faith. They know how to praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in verses. They have all become masters, whereas before they were hardly able to be pupils.⁶

The hymns of Ambrose have been regarded as a prime example of Latin-Christian poetry. As such, scholars have addressed his hymns as poetry and explored their lyrical language.⁷ M. J. Mans focused on the way Ambrose employed biblical accounts and allusions in his hymnody.⁸ But Ambrose had a deeper purpose than just writing beautiful poetry dressed up with a little “Bible talk.” Moorhead rightly says that Ambrose penned “theologically oriented hymns or songs through which communities asserted their faith against rival groups.”⁹ This paper will briefly explore some of the key theological themes in St. Ambrose’s hymns, thus examining some of the truths of the Christian faith he was intending to teach and defend.¹⁰

⁵John Moorhead, “Ambrose and Augustine on Hymns,” *Downside Review* 128:451 (April, 2010), 82.

⁶Quoted in Jan den Boeft, “Ambrosius Lyricus,” in J. den Boeft and A. Hilhorst, eds., *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 77.

⁷Jan den Boeft, “Ambrosius Lyricus;” “*Cantatur ad delectationem*: Ambrose’s Lyric Poetry,” in Willemien Otten and Karla Pollman, eds., *Poetry and Exegesis in Premodern Latin Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 81-97; “Delight and Imagination: Ambrose’s Hymns,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 62:8 (2008), 425-440; M. B. Pranger, “Time and the Integrity of Poetry,” in Willemien Otten and Karla Pollmann, eds., *Poetry and Exegesis in Premodern Latin Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 49-62.

⁸M. J. Mans, “The Function of Biblical Material in the Hymns of St. Ambrose,” in *Early Christian Poetry*, 91-100.

⁹Moorhead, 82. F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), also comments: “Composed with the practical aim of expounding the doctrines of the Catholic faith in a manner sufficiently simple to capture the imagination of the unlearned, these hymns possess at the same time the admirable qualities of dignity, directness, and evangelical fervour” (34).

¹⁰For the purpose of the paper, I will look at the four hymns by Ambrose generally regarded by scholars as truly genuine: *Aeterne rerum conditor*, *Deus creator omnium*, *Iam surgit hora tertia*, and *Veni, redemptor gentium*. I will also consider two hymns traditionally attributed to Ambrose which are included in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993): *Splendor paternae gloria* and *O lux beata Trinitas*.

The Trinity

Since Ambrose was dealing with vestiges of the Arian controversy, it only makes sense that the doctrine of the Trinity received substantial attention in his hymns. In fact, almost every one of his hymns concludes with a doxological stanza.¹¹ For example, *Iam surgit hora tertia* concludes:

To God the Father, glory be,
And glory to His only Son,
And to the Spirit Paraclete,
The One in Three and Three in One.¹²

In one instance, the stanza of praise to the Trinity includes a prayer.

Pray we the Father and the Son,
And Holy Ghost: O Three in One,
Blest Trinity, whom all obey,
Guard Thou Thy sheep by night and day.¹³

If *Deus creator omnium* was one of those hymns sung by the congregation in the Portian basilica, this prayer would have certainly been appropriate.

One particular Trinitarian emphasis is the equality of the three Persons of the Godhead. In *Veni, redemptor gentium*, Ambrose addressed the Son in this way: “O equal to the Father, Thou!”¹⁴ This was an important defense against the Arians. Likewise, when he mentioned the work of Son and the work of the Spirit on equal terms with the work of the Father in the successive stanzas of *Splendor paternae gloriae*, he was defending the truth against the heresies which tried to diminish the Holy Spirit.

O Thou true Son, on us Thy glance
let fall in royal radiance,
the Spirit's sanctifying beam
upon our earthly senses stream
The Father too our prayers implore,
Father of glory evermore,
the Father of all grace and might,
to banish sin from our delight.¹⁵

¹¹The exception in this group of hymns is *Splendor paternae gloriae*. But, as will be seen, the doctrine of the Trinity is not neglected in this hymn.

¹²Ambrose, *Iam surgit hora tertia*, <http://forum.musicasacra.com/forum/discussion/7055/jam-surgit-hora-tertia/p1>.

¹³Ambrose, *Deus creator omnium*, tr. by Charles Bigg, <http://cyberhymnal.org/htm/c/r/creatore.htm>.

¹⁴Ambrose, *Veni, redemptor gentium*, tr. by John Mason Neale, <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/VeniRedemptorG.html>.

¹⁵Ambrose (attributed), *Splendor paternae gloriae*, tr. by Robert Bridges, <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/Splendor.html>. *O lux beata Trinitas* (tr. by

This was a time when the vestiges of the Roman pagan religion were still spooking around and the Trinitarian heresies were still exerting influence. Ambrose's hymns put the doctrine of the Trinity on the hearts and minds of his people as they regularly sang these hymns in worship. His doctrine of the Trinity echoed the creed confessed at the recently completed Council of Constantinople, especially the phrase in the third article describing the Holy Spirit, "who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified."¹⁶ He was putting into poetic form and "in catchy sound bites" what he expounded on at greater length in *On the Holy Spirit*¹⁷ and *On the Christian Faith*. In today's postmodern world of religious toleration and pluralism, Ambrose's clear proclamation of the orthodox Trinitarian faith still needs to be sung by God's people.

Creation and God's Omnipotence

An emphasis on the Trinity in Ambrose's hymns naturally led to singing about various attributes of the one, true, triune God. One attribute in particular receives a great deal of attention: God's omnipotence, especially in relation to his work of creation. Two of his hymns emphasize this doctrine from the opening stanza.

Creator of the earth and sky,
Ruling the firmament on high,
Clothing the day white robes of light,
Blessing with gracious sleep the night.¹⁸

John Mason Neale, <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/OLuxBeata.html>) echoes a similar thought in terms of the equality of all three Persons receiving equal praise.

All laud to God the Father be;
All praise, Eternal Son, to thee;
All glory, as is ever meet,
To God the Holy Paraclete.

¹⁶*Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, 19.

¹⁷The line about "the Spirit's sanctifying beam" echoes these words from *On the Holy Spirit*:

The Holy Spirit is not, then, of the substance of things corporeal, for He sheds incorporeal grace on corporeal things; nor, again, is He of the substance of invisible creatures, for they receive His sanctification, and through Him are superior to the other works of the universe. Whether you speak of Angels, or Dominions, or Powers, every creature waits for the grace of the Holy Spirit. For as we are children through the Spirit, because "God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying, Abba, Father; so that thou art now not a servant but a son;" in like manner, also, every creature is waiting for the revelation of the sons of God, whom in truth the grace of the Holy Spirit made sons of God. Therefore, also, every creature itself shall be changed by the revelation of the grace of the Spirit, "and shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (*NPNF*, 101).

¹⁸Ambrose, *Deus creator omnium*.

Maker of all, eternal King,
 who day and night about dost bring:
 who weary mortals to relieve,
 dost in their times the season give.¹⁹

What's noteworthy is that he speaks not only about God's creative work at the beginning of time ("Creator of the earth and sky;" "Maker of all, eternal King"), but his ongoing work of caring for and ruling the universe with his almighty power ("Ruling the firmament on high, Clothing the day white robes of light, Blessing with gracious sleep the night;" "who day and night about dost bring: who weary mortals to relieve, dost in their times the season give").

Ambrose does not only address the very general creating and preserving power which is evident in nature, but he also makes this very personal and practical for the daily lives of believers in *Deus creator omnium*.

That rest may comfort weary men,
 And brace to useful toil again,
 And soothe awhile the harassed mind,
 And sorrow's heavy load unbind.
 Day sinks; we thank Thee for Thy gift;
 Night comes; and once again we lift
 Our prayer and vows and hymns that we
 Against all ills may shielded be.²⁰

One can again imagine how these comforting words could give courage and fortitude to Christians facing persecution and threats of physical harm. The Creator-God of all power and might was their God, their Protector, the One who could and would "guard Thou Thy sheep by night and day." In a society where the creative work of the one true God is denigrated and denied by those inside and outside of the church, Ambrose's confession of God's creating and sustaining omnipotence needs to be on the lips of God's people. In a world filled with threats of terrorism and violence and the damage of disease and disaster, Ambrose's proclamation of God's power at work in the lives of God's people can provide comfort and hope.

The Incarnation and the Divinity of Christ

While the Arian heresies, which were still troubling the church in Milan, had Trinitarian implications, at their heart they were Christological, in that they claimed that the Son was a created being and lesser in rank than the Father. Therefore, teaching the truth of the Incarnation and the divinity of Christ in hymns was high on Ambrose's agenda.

¹⁹Ambrose, *Aeterne rerum conditor*, tr. by William Copeland, <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/AeterneRerum.html>.

²⁰Ambrose, *Deus creator omnium*.

Christ's divinity is obviously proclaimed in all of the doxological stanzas. But this theological truth is thoroughly confessed and defended when Ambrose addresses the Incarnation of the eternal Word, as he does in one stanza of *Iam surgit hora tertia* and throughout *Veni, redemptor gentium*.

In *Iam surgit hora tertia*, a hymn which is predominantly about the crucifixion and its implications, Ambrose ties in the Incarnation in the second-to-last stanza.

So we believe that God was born;
His Virgin Birth we do not scorn.
Sin of the world He took away
He's at the Father's right, today.²¹

Using the phrase, "God was born," was a clear refuting of Arian teaching. In this one stanza, he also teaches the reason for the Incarnation: to take away the sin of the world. In a way, his reference to the Incarnation in a hymn primarily about the crucifixion ties together Christmas and Good Friday.

Veni, redemptor gentium, perhaps Ambrose's most well-known hymn in modern Protestant circles, has as its primary theme the virgin birth of Christ, God taking on human flesh.²² In a masterful way, Ambrose unfolds a slightly different truth about the Incarnation in each stanza. In the first stanza, he stresses that the Redeemer of all is also the God of all who was revealing his redemptive work in the miracle of the virgin birth. In the second stanza, he brings in the role of the Spirit in the Incarnation. The third and fourth stanzas emphasize the purity of Christ's birth because he was born of a virgin and the subsequent result that in the person of Christ God is here on earth, truly divine and truly human. "God in his temple dwells below." "A giant in twofold substance one."²³ The fifth stanza touches on the reason for the Incarnation: to restore eternal life to humanity made mortal by sin.

²¹Ambrose, *Iam surgit hora tertia*.

²²Lenti explains the reason for the popularity of this hymn.

Its popularity in modern hymns probably owes more to its use in the Lutheran Church, for it was one of several Latin hymns that Martin Luther translated into German. His text, with the German title *Nun Komm, der Heiden Heiland*, was sung to an adaptation of the plainsong melody used with the original Latin text. The result is a particularly fine example of an early German Reformation hymn, its reputation being further enhanced when Bach used the chorale melody in several of his compositions (47).

As an example of its continued use, it is the "hymn of the day" for the First Sunday in Advent in the lectionary connected to *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* under the title, "Savior of the Nations, Come."

²³Ambrose, *Veni, redemptor gentium*. In the second line above, Ambrose in a simple way defends the truth against attempts to separate the two natures.

O equal to the Father, Thou!
 Gird on Thy fleshly mantle now;
 The weakness of our mortal state
 With deathless might invigorate.²⁴

The sixth stanza draws the singer into the reality of the Incarnation by making it personal. This cradle of the manger is holding the God-man who shines in the darkness of this sinful world and in whom we believe. The seventh (and final) stanza is doxological, although it keeps the overall theme of the Incarnation in the forefront with the first two lines.

All praise, eternal Son, to Thee,
 Whose advent set Thy people free.²⁵

Again, it is easy to see why Ambrose wanted the church in Milan to know the truths of the Incarnation and the divinity of Christ. This was one of the key threats posed by the heretics who were harassing the people. With his hymns, Ambrose was impressing the scriptural truths of Christ's Incarnation which he expounded on in much greater detail in *On the Christian Faith*. In many parts of the church today, the emphasis on Christ as the Son of God who took on human flesh in the womb of a virgin to be the Redeemer of the world is at worst denied and at best downplayed for a Jesus who is a champion of social justice or a teacher of morals, but not Savior. Ambrose's winsome confession of these key truths of the Christian faith still deserves to be on the lips, ears, and hearts of God's people today.

The Atonement

As was mentioned above, Ambrose also addressed the reason for the Incarnation. The Son of God became man in order to die for sinful humanity. In an interesting way, Ambrose placed this truth upon the hearts of the worshipers in Milan, especially in *Iam surgit hora tertia*.²⁶ Employing Mark's Gospel which uses the Roman accounting of time, he emphasizes that starting with the "third hour" Christ, in taking up his cross, was bringing to a climax human history, and especially the salvation history of those who believe.

The hour at which He ends our time
 Of stupor from that first bad crime,

²⁴Ambrose, *Veni, redemptor gentium*. It is interesting to note that in the fourth stanza of the hymn, *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, the last two lines of this stanza are repeated verbatim, applying the thought to the work of the Holy Spirit: *infirmi nostri corporis / virtute firmans perpeti*. C. T. Aufdemberge, *Christian Worship: Handbook* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 204.

²⁵Ambrose, *Veni, redemptor gentium*.

²⁶Not surprisingly, this hymn was sung at *Terce* during the Easter season.

Destroys the world's guilt with His blood;
Washed out death's kingdom with its flood.

Then at this blessed hour of day,
The grace of Christ came into play
And Truth made faith complete and full
In all His churches, pole to pole.²⁷

In a clear and simple way, Ambrose ties in the fact that Christ died for all because all are guilty on account of Adam and Eve's fall. The reason for the Incarnation and the heart of the Christian gospel find expression in these words sung by the worshipers of Milan. In a world which seems more evil and sinful by the day, the clear message of Christ's atoning work proclaimed in the poetry of Ambrose is a timeless one.

Conclusion

The hymns of Ambrose served numerous purposes. They served to bring the congregation together.²⁸ They touched the emotions, as Augustine noted.²⁹ They offered great comfort. They employed God's creation of language. But Ambrose had an even larger purpose in mind. His hymns proclaimed Christian doctrine in a memorable way which touched the emotions, brought consolation to hurting and fearful hearts, and put on the lips of God's people the teachings of the orthodox Christian faith. Boeft's comments are correct.

He did not compose beautiful songs which were gratifying to the ears, but authentic poetry which could move men's hearts. Small wonder that in his bitter grief for the death of his mother, Augustine found consolation in the memory of the hymn *Deus creator omnium*, small wonder that the faithful in the basilica Portiana were mesmerized: they sang about their orthodox faith in the Trin-

²⁷Ambrose, *Iam surgit hora tertia*. In the next stanza of this hymn, Ambrose also relates the account of Jesus' words on the cross to John and Mary.

²⁸Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), stresses this as the primary purpose of his hymns. "Its [congregational singing] principal value was to unify the congregation: singing helped concentrate their attention and drown out background noise . . . By joining their voices in song, the people of God could transcend the dizzy social chasms which in real life separated them" (225). His point is valid, but I think there is a larger theological purpose. Fostering unity was a byproduct, in my opinion.

²⁹Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (NPNF, 134) writes:

Nor was I satiated in those days with the wondrous sweetness of considering the depth of Thy counsels concerning the salvation of the human race. How greatly did I weep in Thy hymns and canticles, deeply moved by the voices of Thy sweet-speaking Church! The voices flowed into mine ears, and the truth was poured forth into my heart, whence the agitation of my piety overflowed, and my tears ran over, and blessed was I therein.

ity, not with dogmatic formulae which had been put into metre by a prelate, but in the wonderful lyrical stanzas of a poet: *grande Carmen istud est quo nihil potentius*.³⁰

This chief purpose of Ambrose's hymns—to teach the truth and defend the faith—has continued in the church, especially in the churches descending from the Reformation.³¹ The key theological truths of Christianity continue to come under attack. Christians need to continue having those truths impressed on their minds and hearts. Christians need to continue defending and confessing those truths. The theological themes of Ambrose's hymns—especially those explored in this short paper—provide a model for modern Christian hymnody to emulate so that the church in her song can continue to teach the truth and defend the faith.

Savior of the nations, come;
Virgin's Son, make here your home.
Marvel now, O heav'n and earth,
That the Lord chose such a birth.

From the Father's throne he came
And ascended to the same,
Captive leading death and hell—
High the song of triumph swell!

Praise to God the Father sing,
Praise to God the Son, our King,
Praise to God the Spirit be
Ever and eternally.³²

³⁰"This is a great song, than which nothing is more powerful," Boeft, "Ambrosius Lyricus," 89.

³¹Vincent Lenti points out a parallel between Ambrose and Luther.

If Ambrose was not the author of all 'Ambrosian' hymns, he was most definitely the inspiration for them. His position might be likened to that of Martin Luther, from whom he is separated by more than 11 centuries of church history. Both saw the potential for hymns to inspire and uplift the people of God, particularly in times of trouble. Both created hymns of enduring value; both provided the example and inspiration for others to turn their talents and energies toward hymn writing. Therefore, the special legacy of Ambrose—the man who stood firm against emperors, pagans, and heretics alike—was the introduction of the metrical hymn to the Western Church, something which Christians of all denominations continue to share in their worship. (48)

³²*Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* 2:1,4,5. As I conclude this paper, it is the Ascension of Our Lord. The fourth stanza is especially fitting for that occasion.