

Enchantment and Creed
in the Hymns of
Ambrose of Milan

BRIAN P. DUNKLE, SJ

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Table of Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1. Hymnody, Heresy, and Doctrinal Identity	13
2. Ambrose's Preaching, Enchantment, and Nature and Grace	52
3. Ambrose's Daytime Hymns and the Mystagogy of Nature	85
4. Christ in Scripture and the Hymns for Dominical Feasts	117
5. Ecclesial Identity in the Hymns for Martyrs	143
6. The Features of Ambrosian Reception	174
7. Ambrosian Imitation in Sedulius and Prudentius	186
Conclusion	214
<i>Appendix: The Hymns</i>	221
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	233
<i>General Index</i>	255

Introduction

Mysteria incognita
scripta quoque abscondita
plana fecit fidelibus
Pontifex hic catholicus.

Mysteries unknown
and writings that were hidden
this Catholic pontifex
made plain for believers.

—*De Sancto Ambrosio*
fourteenth century, for Lauds

By a peculiarity of modern scholarship, an author who is generally reduced to his sources, even labeled an “unscrupulous plagiarist,” is also praised as one of the greatest innovators in the history of Christian literature and worship.¹ “The Father of church hymnody,” as Guido Maria Dreves called Ambrose of Milan over a century ago, developed hymn texts and metrical structures that had few, if any, clear antecedents.² Ambrose, the devoted imitator of Greek writers in his preaching and treatises, created a radically new, distinctively Latin approach to proclaiming the Christian faith in verse.

The proximate setting for the spread of Ambrose’s invention is well known: the hymns were linked to Ambrose the bishop’s response to the crisis occasioned by the attempt of the empress Justina and her Homoian supporters to occupy the Basilica Portiana for the celebration of their paschal liturgy. This context prompts my study to consider two basic questions, or perhaps one basic question asked with two different inflections: First, why did Ambrose choose *hymns* to respond to the Homoians? Why were preaching and politics,

¹ On Ambrose the “plagiarist,” see Harald Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers and the Classics* (Göteborg: Göteborg Elanders, 1958), 372. For a succinct response to the claims of plagiarism, see Luigi Pizzolato, *La dottrina esegetica di sant’Ambrogio* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1978), 5–7.

² Guido Maria Dreves, *Aurelius Ambrosius, “der Vater des Kirchengesanges”*: Eine hymnologische Studie (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1893); on Ambrose as the first poet of the Middle Ages, see Stephen Gaselee, *Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), viii.

his standard methods of responding to rivals, not enough? And, second: Why did *Ambrose* choose hymns to respond to Homoians? What is distinctively Ambrosian about the methods and aims of his hymnodic corpus? The first question relates to the emergence and motives of Christian hymnody in the fourth century. The second relates to Ambrose's pastoral and, in particular, mystagogical preaching. I hope that exploring these two contexts for Ambrose's hymnodic project will illuminate our understanding of Ambrose as bishop, poet, and theologian.

I argue that Ambrose, like many of his predecessors, composed his hymns to respond to doctrinal rivals.³ This claim, based on Ambrose's own report, is uncontroversial, and yet it can often be downplayed in scholarship.⁴ To be sure, specifically creedal language is relatively muted in the hymns. Yet I maintain that, given the strategies of Ambrose's preaching, we should not expect to account for the theological aims of the hymns by reference to doctrinal terms alone. Rather, drawing on Ambrose's catechetical preaching, and his mystagogies in particular, I consider the bishop's persistent concern to influence not simply the creedal formulae that his congregation employs but also to transform their manner of encountering nature, Scripture, and themselves. By his preaching Ambrose creates a community of pro-Nicene Christians who perceive their world as somehow elevated by the grace that flows from Christ, true God. Primarily by appealing to their spiritual senses, Ambrose the preacher presents his audience with a sacramental understanding of biblical text and ritual experience along pro-Nicene contours. We find the same pedagogy at work in the hymns.

In my study I identify this as a program of "enchantment." The term corresponds to Ambrose's own description of his hymns as "chants" or "incantations" (*carmina*), designed, in part, to "seduce" his congregation.⁵ But "enchantment," I recognize, has special resonance in contemporary theology. In *A Secular Age* Charles Taylor uses the term as the negation of "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*), Max Weber's famous descriptor for the changes in belief wrought by modernity.⁶ For Taylor the term captures a crucial feature of the move from the "pre-modern" condition, where the enchanted world is the "world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which

³ Most clearly articulated recently by Michael Stuart Williams, "Hymns as Acclamations: The Case of Ambrose of Milan," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6 (2013), 111–14. Older accounts can exaggerate this function: see the conclusion of Stephen Gaselee, *The Transition from the Late Latin Lyric to the Medieval Love Poem* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1931), 14: "He was a teacher rather than a theologian, and his hymns were written to instruct his people in the Christian faith, and for no other purpose."

⁴ Representative are studies that attend to the hymns' literary quality, especially the careful work of Jan den Boeft, e.g., "Ambrosius Lyricus," in *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Jan den Boeft and A. Hilhorst (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 77–89, who, in contrast to views such as Gaselee's (*Transition*), emphasizes Ambrose's talents as a lyric poet.

⁵ *Ep.* 75a.34.

⁶ *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 25–6.

our ancestors lived in.⁷ By applying “enchantment” to Ambrose’s pastoral program in general and his hymns in particular, I suggest that he hoped to shape his congregation’s experience along distinctive, pro-Nicene lines. Baptism, incorporating the initiate into the life of Christ and the church, is linked intimately to a transformed sensitivity to the “spirits, demons, and moral forces” that inhabit the believer’s world.

Of course, Ambrose was composing his hymns for an audience that lived, according to Taylor’s chronology, in an enchanted age. All those who encountered the bishop’s songs—pagans, Nicene Christians, and Homoians—shared some sense of the divine in relationship to the physical universe. Ambrose’s mode of enchantment is intimately connected to shaping that sense according to distinctive confessional contours. His songs, as much as his sermons, mold the new, sacramental vision acquired by the initiate through baptism.

AMBROSE’S HYMNS IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

By offering a comprehensive account of the coherence of Ambrose’s hymnody, this study tries to supplement the existing literature on the bishop of Milan, his preaching and mystagogical sermons, and especially his hymns. Given the reams of scholarship on all these topics, this ambition merits some defense. Reviewing the literature I suggest that its main focus has been on discrete elements of Ambrose’s life and writings rather than on the broad sweep of his thought and pastoral project. As Marcia Colish notes, “One of the most striking features about the scholarship on Ambrose of Milan to date has been its narrowness of focus.”⁸

Her judgment applies especially to the hymns. Analyses of them date to the Middle Ages, and at least six quality editions have been published in the past two centuries.⁹ In recent literature, the focus has been fixed primarily on the vexing issues of authenticity and textual criticism. Because Ambrose’s

⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26; for a recent application of the term in liturgical psalmody, see Carol Harrison, “Enchanting the Soul: The Music of the Psalms,” in *Meditations of the Heart: The Psalms in Early Christian Thought and Practice. Essays in Honour of Andrew Louth*, ed. Andreas Andreopoulos, Augustine Casiday, and Carol Harrison (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 205–23.

⁸ Marcia Colish, *Ambrose’s Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005), 5.

⁹ The essential introduction to the hymns is Jacques Fontaine et al., eds., *Ambroise: Hymnes* (Paris: Cerf, 1994, repr. 2008), 11–92, which informs much of my presentation (note that parts I to IV of the volume’s introduction (10–102) are by Fontaine, while part V, treating the manuscript tradition (104–23), is by Marie Hélène Jullien); throughout this volume I refer to the edition as “Fontaine, *Hymnes*,” while identifying the study of each hymn by its editor in the Fontaine edition.

Hymnody, Heresy, and Doctrinal Identity

quantum fleui in hymnis et canticis tuis suaue sonantis ecclesiae tuae
uocibus commotus acriter!

—Augustine, *Confessions* 9.6 (CCL 27.141)

The hymns of Ambrose are an innovation, with few precedents in the Christian West. Nevertheless, any adequate treatment must consider their contexts: their place in the development of Christian song, congregational worship, and theological discourse, as well as their engagement with classical and biblical sources. In this chapter I summarize the issues without attempting to offer a comprehensive account of early Christian/late antique hymns and verse. I treat briefly the development of Christian singing from its origins in the New Testament to the fourth century, arguing throughout that there is a distinction between hymns devised for common worship, such as the *Odes of Solomon*, which draw heavily on biblical material and the Psalms, and hymns composed for purely literary ends by learned authors, such as Clement of Alexandria and Marius Victorinus, which are modeled after pagan and philosophical verse. While Ambrose's hymns have obvious precedents in the songs composed for liturgical settings, they are also influenced by the literary verse. Moreover, Ambrose himself channels the concern evident in these sources about the power, and danger, of music in communicating doctrine.

As I discuss these sources, I want to present more than a string of names and texts from the early church but also to show how Christian hymnody emerged with certain features that Ambrose adopts and develops in his original compositions. Later in "‘Cautious’ Orthodox Responses," I focus on Ambrose's contemporary, Ephrem the Syrian, along with Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine, to locate Ambrose's use of hymns in a tradition that understood song in worship to promote a shared engagement with the natural order and the reading of Scripture. More than any other medium in the late fourth century, liturgical song was linked to an affective and spiritual transformation that promoted an orthodox and sacramental worldview, forming a communal

Ambrose's Preaching, Enchantment, and Nature and Grace

It is easiest to tell what transubstantiation is by saying this: little children should be taught about it as early as possible. Not of course using the word "transubstantiation," because it is not a little child's word. But the thing can be taught, and it is best taught at mass at the consecration, the one part where a small child should be got to fix its attention on what is going on. I mean a child that is beginning to speak, one that understands enough language to be told and to tell you things that have happened and to follow a simple story. Such a child can be taught then by whispering to it such things as: "Look! Look what the priest is doing. . . . He is saying Jesus' words that change the bread into Jesus' body. Now he's lifting it up. Look! Now bow your head and say 'My Lord and my God,'" and then "Look, now he's taken hold of the cup. He's saying the words that change the wine into Jesus' blood. Look up at the cup. Now bow your head and say 'We believe, we adore your precious blood, O Christ of God.'"

—G. E. M. Anscombe, "On Transubstantiation"

In her essay "On Transubstantiation," the analytic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe, best known for her translations and studies of Wittgenstein, reflects on forming a child's perception of the Eucharist as a model for explaining traditional doctrine to a contemporary audience.¹ What seems a rather personal, even touching, anecdote in fact plays a central role in the argument of the essay, which proposes a careful account of the metaphysical relationship that obtains between the accidents of the bread and wine and the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. Moreover, irrespective of the author's intention, the account itself stands stylistically in a distinctive catechetical tradition. Specific features of her approach recall the training offered to neophytes by the great fourth-century Christian mystagogues, including Ambrose of Milan. The linguistic pointing ("Look" appears three times in

¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3: *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1981), 107.

Ambrose's Daytime Hymns and the Mystagogy of Nature

A thing *is*, according to the mode in which one looks at it. "Where others," says Blake, "see but the Dawn coming over the hill, I see the sons of God shouting for joy."

—Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis"¹

Examining Ambrose's preaching in the 380s, a period that marked the bishop's ascendancy in the ecclesial and imperial stature as well as his fiercest theological disputes, I have argued that Ambrose aimed especially to form the spiritual senses of his congregation, primarily the catechumens and neophytes. Moreover, the sort of vision that Ambrose hoped to communicate reflected the polemical context of the period; that is, Ambrose's distinctive understanding of orthodoxy conditions in subtle but important ways his preaching on details of ritual initiation and scriptural interpretation. Not only did the bishop want to convey discrete bits of doctrine to his hearers but he also hoped to train them in a new, distinctive Christian character that would read Scripture and liturgy according to Nicaea. Orthodoxy becomes a lens for viewing life, especially in response to the challenges of 386.

In this chapter I consider the place of the hymns, which began to spread during this crisis, as part of this project.² Their metrical and poetic techniques, I argue, help explain their appeal to a mixed and embattled congregation. I then identify these techniques in the four hymns for the hours of the day in which Ambrose's distinctive pastoral, poetic, and theological methods contribute to the creation of a supple form of doctrinal hymnody. In particular, Ambrose's use of indexical terms, repetition, and temporal imagery parallel such

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, ed. with intro. by Isobel Murray (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 158. Perhaps true to the claim he cites, the quotation seems not to exist as such in Blake's extant corpus (available at <<http://www.blakearchive.org>>).

² Some recent treatments of the theology of the hymns include Inos Biffi, "La teologia degli *Inni* di sant'Ambrogio," *Studia Ambrosiana* 2 (2008), 109–31; Francesco Corsaro, "L'innografia ambrosiana: dalla polemica teologica alla liturgia," *Augustinianum* 38 (1998), 371–84.

Christ in Scripture and the Hymns for Dominical Feasts

Having described the strategy of sensitization that appears in Ambrose's hymns for the hours of the day, in this chapter and Chapter 5 I explore the rest of the hymns in the collection, those composed for feasts and for martyrs, to locate the strategy influencing the corpus. I begin with a brief discussion that demonstrates the distinction in language and images peculiar to each of the three groups of hymns. Then I examine the hymns for the dominical feasts, with special emphasis on their Christological reading of Scripture. I hope to show that careful reading suggests a studied, Nicene program informing Ambrose's compositional project. Taken together, the hymns reflect Ambrose's broad goal of creating a community of "teachers, who scarcely could have been students."

GROUPING THE HYMNS

In Chapter 3 I followed a scholarly consensus in treating the hymns for the hours as a representative subgroup within the authentic corpus. Given the widespread consensus regarding those hymns' authenticity, studies can have confidence that common features among the hymns reflect Ambrose's broader hymnody.¹ Scholars tend to distinguish the rest of the corpus further, into hymns for dominical feasts and for martyrs, often subdividing the latter group to single out the three hymns for Roman martyrs as a unit.² In general these

¹ As represented by Ansgar Franz, *Tageslauf und Heilsgeschichte: Untersuchungen zum literarischen Text und liturgischen Kontext der Tagzeitenhymnen des Ambrosius von Mailand* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 1994), 27; Cesare Pasini, *Ambrogio di Milano: Azione e pensiero di un vescovo* (Milan: Cinisello Balsamo, 1996), 115; Jean-Louis Charlet, *La création poétique dans le Cathemerinon de Prudence* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1982), 21.

² Alexander Zerfass, *Mysterium Mirabile: Poesie, Theologie und Liturgie in den Hymnen des Ambrosius von Mailand zu den Christusfesten des Kirchenjahres* (Basel: A. Francke, 2008), 2–3.

Ecclesial Identity in the Hymns for Martyrs

The remaining hymns in Ambrose's corpus were composed to accompany annual feasts for the saints.¹ Fontaine's edition includes seven, which treat both biblical figures and recent martyrs: Peter and Paul, Agnes, Lawrence, Gervasius and Protasius, Victor, Nabor, and Felix, John the Evangelist (who, for Ambrose, both suffers and survives martyrdom), and a hymn for all the martyrs. By considering these hymns as a subgroup within Ambrose's corpus, this chapter identifies certain features that indicate the presence of an ongoing mystagogical catechesis aimed at forming the spiritual allegiances of the Nicenes in Milan.

The martyr hymns aim both to relate the congregation's orthodoxy to classical exemplars and to establish the Nicenes as the true Milanese. The hymns for Roman martyrs, I argue, show a careful communication of classical virtues in a scriptural register. I then treat the hymns that celebrate martyrs linked to Milan to show their focus on promoting a local, civic loyalty imbued with the Christian faith. Throughout, I suggest that both sets can be related indirectly to Ambrose's pro-Nicene project prompted by the crisis of 386. These hymns show that Ambrose's formation of his congregation centered not only on a mystagogy of sensitization but also a program to strengthen the identification of pro-Nicenes as true Romans and true Milanese.² In these sets of hymns, Ambrose's program acquires a certain focus: the singing

¹ For a thorough treatment of Ambrose's writings on the saints, see Cécile Lanéry, *Ambroise de Milan hagiographe* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2008); for the hymns, see 217–75. For Ambrose on the *dies natalis*, see *Exc.* 2.5.

² While scholars have long noted such themes in the bishop's preaching and treatises, few have treated them in the hymns. For general studies see especially Ernst Dassmann, "Ambrosius und die Märtyrer," *JAC* 18 (1975), 49–68; Ernst Dassmann, *Die Frömmigkeit des Kirchenvaters Ambrosius von Mailand: Quellen und Entfaltung* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1965); Antoon A. R. Bastiaensen, "Paulin de Milan et le culte des martyrs chez saint Ambroise," in *Ambrosius Episcopus*, 2.143–50; Ludovico Garavaglia, "I santi e le ragioni del loro culto negli scritti di Sant'Ambrogio," *Ricerche Storiche della Chiesa Ambrosiana* 7 (1976), 5–28; Matilde Caltabiano, "Ambrogio, Agostino e gli scritti sui martiri," in *Nec timeo mori*, 585–93.