

# Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

## The Year of Saint Paul

### Part 10: The Songs of Saint Paul<sup>1</sup>

I have decided to abbreviate this series of articles from twelve to ten so that I can begin a series of articles on the priesthood in honor of the “Year of the Priesthood,” announced recently by Pope Benedict. Since I’m a big fan of music, I decided to end this series on Paul by looking at the hymns found in his letters.

For those of you who did not already know—there are songs in Sacred Scripture! Most of us are familiar with the obvious ones, like the Psalms. However, there are also less obvious ones, like the many hymns and canticles found in the New Testament. In Saint Paul’s letters, we find several songs or parts of songs.

It is not always easy to detect hymns that have been woven into the text of the New Testament. There are a few criteria, however, that help Scripture scholars distinguish the songs. Sometimes, they might be marked with an introductory phrase such as “It is said” (Ephesians 5:14) or “The one who...” (Philippians 2:6 and Colossians 1:5). Another criterion is a rhythmic style. In other words, the text of the hymn might be structured with a very obvious pattern, much like a contemporary poem. The different vocabulary used in the hymns also tells us that these lines are not original to the author, but came from somewhere else. These, as well as other, criteria help us to note ancient songs found in the New Testament.

The fact that Paul used hymns in his writings tell us several important things—

1. Saint Paul enjoyed Christian music! He was obviously very familiar with these songs and, more than likely, included them in his writings from memory.
2. The early Christians must have done a lot of singing. This is good news for those of us who love music. I once had a man tell me that he hated singing at church. He didn’t think it had any place in prayer. I hated to inform him that heaven is described in Revelation as involving a LOT of singing!
3. The Christian songs from the first century contained a very highly developed Christology. For example, the two hymns found in Philippians and Colossians, as well as others, paint a picture of a highly transcendent Christ. They give Christ a central role in creation, reconciliation, and salvation. This should remind songwriters today to be very careful about the wording in songs. It is not enough to have a good melody in a liturgical song; it must also lift our minds and hearts to the *Truth* of Christ.

One great way that we could end our celebration of the Year of Saint Paul would be to look up some of the hymns found in his writings and read (or sing!) through them. They include some of the most cherished passages in Scripture! Here are some of the songs found in Paul’s writings—<sup>2</sup>

1 Corinthians 13	Romans 8:31-39	Ephesians 2:14-18	Titus 3:4-7
Romans 3:24-26	Romans 11:33-36	Ephesians 5:14	1 Timothy 3:16
Romans 6:1-11	Ephesians 1:3-14	Philippians 2:6-11	2 Timothy 2:11-13
	Ephesians 1:20-23	Colossians 1:15-20	

<sup>1</sup> In honor of the “Year of Saint Paul,” this is part ten of a ten part series on his life and writings.

<sup>2</sup> This list is agreed upon by many notable Scripture scholars.