THE TEXT IN THE MOSAIC OF SANTA PUDENZIANA

BY

FREDRIC W. SCHLATTER, S.J.

The apsidal mosaic of Santa Pudenziana as the oldest extant example of such decoration in the city of Rome has enormous importance in revealing the achievement and context of early Christian art at the beginning of the fifth century. Its predecessors in the more spacious settings of S. Giovanni in Laterano, S. Pietro, and S. Paolo fuori le Mura have totally disappeared except for late drawings that suggest the modifications they had undergone in medieval times, and in the smaller apses of S. Costanza both the scale and the uncertainties of heavy restoration make their witness to apsidal compositions problematic. However, the mosaic in S. Pudenziana, despite the toll of extensive restorations, which affect two-thirds of the present work, and of the successive mutilations resulting from the alterations sponsored by Cardinal Caetani in 1588 and by Cardinal Gabrielli in 1711¹ remains substantially as the original artist conceived it.

The dating of the mosaic depends on a text placed at the bottom of the mosaic and recorded before its disappearance in 1588. Panvinio scrupulously attempted to read what he saw there, and his uncertainties are clear in the three versions he recorded. Although he hesitates about some of the details of his transcriptions, he consistently and unhesitatingly records Innocent's name in the text that purports to record the dedication. Hence the date of the mosaic is fixed to the pontificate of Innocent I (402-417) on the testimony of a sixteenth century witness. The text clearly by this time was damaged and incomplete but not to the point of invalidating the presence of Innocent's name in a fifth century context.²

The mosaic is approximately a decade later than the building alterations that adapted the Thermae Novatianaæ for use as a Christian church. The date for this renovation is secured from the original text of the codex seen in the hand of St. Paul in the mosaic. In the seventeenth century Suarès was able to make out details of the text which at least
yield the terminal date for the alterations in the pontificate of Siricius (384-399) and more exactly to the consulship of Eutychius (398). Another inscription no longer extant records the obituary of Leopardus *lector de Pudentiana* in 384. What emerges therefore, is that the church known as the Titulus Pudentis was already in existence on the site of a second century thermal structure by the last quarter of the fourth century, by 398 the building had been remodelled, and some time between 402 and 417 the present mosaic decoration had been installed in the free-standing niche which now served as the apse of the basilica.

Of the three major texts originally part of the mosaic only the one seen today on the open codex in the left hand of Christ has survived the vagaries of restoration and removal. A second text which apparently formed the lower frame of the mosaic completely disappeared, as has already been noted, in 1588. The third text appeared on the codex held by St. Paul, but its present version is totally unrelated to the original whose shadowy remnant Suarès had recorded. However, the first text, which fortunately is the most important of the three, has survived substantially true to its original wording with the exception perhaps of some minor orthographic changes. The present reading is: *Dominus/Conser/ vatorl Ecclesiae/ Pudentianae*. In this reading *Ecclesiae Pudentianae* seems to be a modernization in spelling that must have occurred with the restorations with Camuccini in 1829-1832 or slightly earlier in the century during the work Cardinal Litta sponsored although Dal Pozzo, perhaps inaccurately, recorded the modernized spelling only a few years after Ciacconio. The presence of *s sanctae* before *Pudentianae* in Ciacconio and not in Dal Pozzo probably reflects an alteration in the text during one of the two restorations known to us: under Cardinal Caetani in 1588, who according to his inscription *ecclesiam vetustate collabentem restituit exornavit*, or under Pope Adrian I (772-795), who according to the *Liber Pontificalis: immo et titulum Pudentis, id est ecclesiae sanctae Pudentianae, in ruinis perven- tam noviter restauravit*, after the original name of the church had become confused. In any case there is no doubt about the reading *Dominus Conservator*, and the variations in the rest of the text are minor. It is precisely the use of *Conservator* that involves important implications about the date of the mosaic and the context of its dedication. However, each element in the original text needs examination.

1. *Ecclesiae*. The question is whether this word refers to a physical building or to the religious community that gathered in it. The latter