



FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Ambrose of Milan c.330 – 397 A.D.

In the decades following Constantine's conversion and Edict of Milan, the relationship between Church and State became a complex and often tumultuous one. Exacerbated by the presence of Arianism, navigating these complex and dangerous waters required excellent leadership, wisdom, and theological development and courage. There are few in the Church's history who rose to this challenge better than Ambrose.

The Life of Ambrose

Family and background

- Born on or about 339 AD in Augusta Treverorum (modern Trier). He was born into a Christian family, although like many in his day postponed his baptism until adulthood. Ambrose was well educated in Rome for a career in government
- His father, Aurelius Ambrosius was Prefect of Gaul. He had an older sister, Marcellina, a devout Christian who lived a semi-monastic life in Rome.
- His brother, Uranius Satyrus, was also a governor of another province

Election to Bishop

- Ambrose was groomed for public office and eventually was appointed governor of northern Italy, Aemilia Liguria, based in Milan around 371.
- In 373, the old Bishop of Milan, Auxentius, died. Auxentius had been appointed by an Arian emperor who had exiled the previous bishop. With a vacant see the ensuing election could easily deteriorate into a riot
- A diligent and conscientious leader and official, whose just and fair rule made him quite popular, Ambrose attended the election proceedings with the intent of keeping the peace. There, the election was going as badly as expected, and when he addressed the crowd, so it goes, a child shouted, "Ambrose, Bishop!".
- The notion stuck and much against his wishes, Ambrose was elected. He tried unsuccessfully to not go through with his consecration, but when the emperor gave his imprimatur on the election Ambrose consented. At the time of his election he was only a catechumen and not even baptized! He was quickly baptized, ordained deacon and priest, and within a week consecrated bishop on December 1st, 373
- Ambrose poured all the intellect, action, and ability that made him a good governor into being bishop. He studied theology diligently to 'catch up', and soon became one of the finest theologians in the West.
- Notable event during his episcopacy: he raised funds to free prisoners of invading Goths by melting down golden communion vessels. This created quite a storm, but he responded, "It is better to preserve for the Lord souls rather than gold...it is better to keep the living vessels than the golden ones" (Duties of the Clergy, 2.137).

Influence on Augustine

- During one of his sermons, for he was a noted preacher, a young teacher of rhetoric sat in the church. This man, who had been on a long, tortured spiritual pilgrimage, was so moved and influenced by Ambrose's sermons that it indelibly led to the young man's conversion. His name was Augustine
- Ambrose later baptized Augustine, but appears to be somewhat unaware of this new convert's exceptional gifts.

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Ambrose and the Emperors

- Ambrose was very close to the imperial family, which served often as a double edged sword, especially since the religious stance of the emperors swayed back and forth between Arianism and Nicene Christianity.
- On one occasion, the Arian empress Justina demanded a separate basilica be built for Arian worship and when Ambrose refused she sent in troops. He held off arrest by having the congregation sing a hymn he had composed. When she relented on the basilica, she demanded that the vessels be turned over, since Ambrose had been willing to give them up earlier for refugee prisoners. His response: "I can take nothing from the Temple of God, nor can I surrender what I received...I am helping the emperor, for it is not right for me to surrender these things, nor for him to take them" (Sermon against Auxentius, 5).
- Clashes with Theodosius, a Nicene emperor, under whom the Council of Constantinople was convened in 381.
- On the first clash justice was actually on the side of the emperor, although Ambrose 'wins'. When some over-zealous Christians burned a local synagogue in Callinicus in 388 the emperor ordered the Christians should pay to have it rebuilt. Ambrose objected that Christians be forced to build a synagogue. Eventually the emperor relented, the synagogue was not build and the arsonists not punished. This was a sad incident, for in an empire calling itself Christian, those whose faith was different would not be protected by the law.
- The second incident occurred when the commandant of Thessalonica was killed in a riot. Ambrose counseled moderation, but in order to make an example Theodosius first sent word the riot had been forgiven, but then ordered troops seal the city and killed all who had gathered there to celebrate the 'pardon'. The next time the emperor tried to enter the church in Milan, Ambrose stood in his way and said, "Stop! A man such as you, stained with sin, whose hands are bathed in blood of injustice, is unworthy, until he repents, to enter this holy place and to partake of communion" (Sozomen, Church History, 7.25). Although some courtiers threatened violence, the emperor realized his sin in light of the truth of Ambrose's words, and gave public signs of his repentance.
- When Theodosius lay on his deathbed, he sent word to the only man who had dared to censure him in public.

Ambrose died Easter Sunday, April 4th, 397.

The Times of Ambrose

- Church & State
 - Arian and Nicene Christianity rising and falling with the faith of the emperors
 - See "Post Constantinian world" notes from Athanasius lecture
- Significance of Milan culturally and imperially
 - Milan was a major city in northern Italy, and the emperors and their families often stayed there when on vacation from Rome.
 - During a significant part of Ambrose's tenure, the administrative seat of the empire and site of the court was Milan, not Rome.
 - Thus to be Bishop of Milan was a significant position, both for the church and the state. Ironically, Ambrose had been both governor and bishop.
- Arianism
 - During Ambrose's time, Arianism threatened to subsume the Nicene Christianity which had denounced it at Nicaea in 325. The theological debate and the socio-political fallout that accompanied the debate, was primarily, but not solely, an Eastern matter (see above, regarding Justina).

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The Theology of Ambrose

- Many extant works: sermons and instructional works, 91 letters, and a number of treatises, including *On the Faith*, *On the Holy Spirit*, and *On the Incarnation*, which were primarily against Arianism. Other treatises were on the sacraments, the duties of clergy, and on penance.
- He knew his Bible well, and used the allegorical and moralist hermeneutics of Origen. However, he was well read in Greek theologians, including Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nazianzus. His Nicene orthodoxy is unquestioned.
- His doctrine of the Fall and sin is very close to Augustine's, his eucharistic teaching was quite transubstantiationist, although not based on such precise philosophy. He did endorse the idea of purgatory, prayers for the dead, and the veneration of saints. His theology was incredibly influential for the medieval catholic church.
- Despite his rather Augustinian views on sin and grace, he was very legalistic and used the ideas of reward and merit, almost to the point of a works based salvation. Again, we see his influence in the rise of the medieval merit/penitential system, which was challenged in the Reformation.
- He did introduce into the West the Eastern practice of chanting antiphonally, and was instrumental in the use of relics and saint veneration in worship, another hallmark of the medieval church. He wrote many hymns and likely the Athanasian Creed.

Key theological points

- Scripture and Tradition: "The Church to teach, the Bible to prove."
- The Bible is the highest authority, but especially with Arianism, the proper interpretation of the Bible requires the Tradition of the Church's orthodox teaching. This was nothing new, but with Ambrose Tradition is elevated to equal authority with the Scriptures. Again, this sets the tone until the 1500s.

Church and State

- Chadwick states, "The main architect in the West on the concept of an orthodox empire from which religious error would be excluded...was Ambrose of Milan".
- Although Ambrose did not write, that we know of, a treatise specifically on the relationship between Church and State, we can put together his ideas from his extant writings and from his interactions and motives with the issues of his day
- The State is ideally good and within the purposes of God. The ordered relationship between Adam & Eve is the state in seed, pre-fall. Thus the State is natural, and it is right that a ruler be given their due. But what is their due, and does the sphere of their (God-given) authority extend to the Church?
- By the third century the Roman empire was totalitarian and nothing lay outside the purview of the emperor, including religious matters. Thus Constantine's involvement in the affairs of the Church was not new or radical, from a State perspective, but certainly radical from a Church perspective.
- The natural category for Christians therefore, in the fourth century and following, was the biblical kings of the Old Testament, and although even Constantine himself declared the judgments of the bishops in Council to be God's judgments, he his interest in Church affairs was expected.
- This expectation fails when successive emperors, often seeking unity over theological truth, enforced their own views or those of whichever group within the Church was most expedient for the needs of the State. Thus leading to a religious liberty and separation of Church and State. Said Donatus in 347, "What has the Emperor to do with the Church?" and reminders of Christ's own words, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's".
- Ambrose held to this dualistic division of Church and State, but in practice and theory did not hold any illusions that the State is entirely neutral in religious affairs nor that the Church lived its life without any responsibility to the state. He has in mind very much a Christian State. The emperor ought not interfere in matters of the Church with his own ideas and morals, but the Christian emperor should enforce the decisions of the bishops, and protect the Church from rival sects, with force if necessary. The Church, in turn, is the guardian of moral law and should speak its mind to the emperor when political decisions are determined to be unchristian, and use its own force (spiritual sanction, excommunication) if necessary.

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- Thus, ultimately, the king is accountable to the Church, since the Church is accountable to God for the welfare of her flock, including the King. The Church and State are not separated but interpenetrated, with ultimate authority falling on the Church. It must be noted that although this position was not specifically outlined by Ambrose in detail, or pushed to its full extent by him. Nonetheless, the trajectory is in place for the medieval idea that the monarch is directly responsible to God for his use of the sword.