

## AMBROSE, ST.

Bishop of Milan, Father, and Doctor of the Church; b. Trèves (Trier, Germany), c. A.D. 339; d. Milan, Italy, April 4, 397. His family, perhaps in part ultimately of Greek origin, belonged to the high Roman aristocracy. At the time of his birth his father was praetorian prefect of the Gauls, one of the chief civil offices in the Roman Empire. Following Ambrose's father's death, his brother St. Satyrus, his sister St. Marcellina, and he were brought to Rome, where the brothers received an excellent education in the liberal arts and in law. Their education both in the family household and at school included a thorough training in Greek, which was to stand Ambrose in good stead later. He must have received a solid training in Christian doctrine also in a household in which Christian conduct and piety were emphasized. His sister Marcellina took the veil from Pope Liberius in 353. About 365 Ambrose and Satyrus entered the civil service as advocates, and c. 370 both were promoted to provincial governorships, Ambrose being made *consularis*, or governor, of Liguria and Aemilia with his residence at Milan, the imperial capital of the Roman Empire. He soon acquired a reputation for uprightedness in administration and for blameless character. On the death of the Arian Bishop Auxentius, he had to quell the violence that arose regarding the choice of a successor among Catholics and Arians, and then, much against his will, he was unanimously chosen as bishop by both sides. Although brought up in a Christian family, he was still a catechumen. Within a few days after his Baptism he was ordained to the priesthood and consecrated as bishop of Milan (Dec. 7, 374).

**Episcopate.** He immediately distributed his share of the family wealth to the poor and set an example of strict asceticism in the episcopal household, which was organized on a kind of semimonastic basis. In the administration of his charities he received the enthusiastic and self-sacrificing support of his brother Satyrus (d. 378). Under the tutelage of the learned priest St. Simplicianus, who later succeeded him in the See of Milan, he applied himself to the systematic study of theology. In exegesis he was profoundly influenced by the allegorical method of interpretation as developed by Philo and Origen. His chief guides in theology were St. Athanasius, Didymus the Blind, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Basil, and Hippolytus. The investigations of P. Courcelle have shown, too, that he was well acquainted with Plotinus and made fruitful use of Neoplatonic ideas in his development of Christian thought.

However, Ambrose remained typically Roman in thought and language. In his exegesis and in his theological expositions, as well as in the homilies that underlie most of his works, and even in his letters, he exhibits a



*St. Ambrose barring Theodosius from the cathedral at Milan, painting on panel by Ambrogio Borgognone (c. 1450 or 1460 to 1523).*

marked predilection for moral teaching and exhortation. All his writings were composed at short notice, as the occasion demanded, in the course of an extraordinarily busy and difficult episcopate. From the days of his election, he was repeatedly involved in problems of the gravest import for the Church and for the State, and he soon came to be recognized throughout the Western Empire as the great champion of orthodoxy and of the rights of the Church.

**Altar of Victory.** On his accession, the young Emperor GRATIAN (375–383) refused to accept the pagan title *pontifex maximus*; and some years later (381), in his second edict against paganism, he ordered the removal of the altar and statue of Victory from the Senate house in Rome. The powerful pagan party sent a delegation headed by SYMMACHUS to Milan to protest; but, under the influence of Ambrose, it was refused an audience at court. In the summer of 384, after the murder of Gratian (383), a new delegation under the leadership of Symmachus,

then Praetorian Prefect, presented an eloquently written *Relatio*, or *Memorial*, to the imperial consistory and the boy-emperor VALENTINIAN (383–392), again pleading for the restoration of the altar and statue. Ambrose hastily prepared a strong refutation of the petition, and the request for restoration was denied. Both the *Memorial* of Symmachus and the reply of Ambrose (*Epist.* 18) are extant—at least in the revised form that was eventually given them.

**Conflict with the Arian Empress Justina.** Despite the aid rendered to the position of Valentinian by Ambrose's mission to the usurper Maximus at Treves in 383, Valentinian's mother, the Empress Justina, fearing the growing ascendancy of the bishop over her son, and as a staunch Arian, organized a coalition against Ambrose. She raised an issue by demanding that one basilica in Milan, namely, the Basilica Portiana outside the walls, be given to the Arians. Ambrose was summoned to the imperial palace near the beginning of Lent in 385, but refused to give up the basilica. The incident created a riot in the city, and Ambrose himself had to be asked to calm his people. A few weeks later, just before Easter, Justina boldly demanded that the new basilica within the walls, Ambrose's own cathedral church, be turned over to the Arians, but he refused with the curt statement that "a bishop cannot give up the temple of God" (*Epist.* 20.1). Beginning on Palm Sunday there was a series of clashes between the imperial troops and Ambrose's congregations at the new and old basilicas, and at the Portiana, accompanied by destruction of property. The bishop, however, stood his ground, and on Holy Thursday news was brought to him at the Portiana that the court had abandoned its attempt to seize any of his churches at that time.

The struggle was not over. With the help of the Arian Bishop Mercurinus Auxentius, Justina had an imperial edict passed against the Catholics in January 386, and Ambrose was summoned to appear before the emperor and his council to dispute the points at issue with Auxentius. He refused, explaining his position at length, and finally, to avoid arrest, remained within the precincts of the new basilica. For several days and nights the church was surrounded by imperial troops, but they did not force an entrance. To relieve tension and to encourage his flock, Ambrose introduced the antiphonal singing of Psalms and of hymns of his own composition. It was on this occasion also that he delivered his *Sermon against Auxentius*, in which, in terse juridical style, he enunciated the epoch-making principle in the relations of Church and State: *imperator enim intra ecclesiam, non supra ecclesiam est* (par. 3). The court was forced to capitulate; the anti-Catholic edict was rescinded, and no further action was taken against Ambrose. After the deaths of Maximus

(388) and Justina, the young Emperor Valentinian again turned to Ambrose for counsel, and Ambrose treated him with fatherly affection until Valentinian's murder in 392.

#### **Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius (379–395).**

Only two incidents marred temporarily the cordial relations of Ambrose and Theodosius, the greatest personalities of their age in Church and State, namely, the Callinicum affair and the massacre of Thessalonica. At Callinicum on the Euphrates the Christian congregation with the connivance of their bishop had burned a Jewish synagogue (late in 388), and Theodosius ordered that the bishop restore the synagogue at his own expense. Ambrose opposed this order in vehement terms on the ground that Christians, in rebuilding a synagogue, would be committing an act of apostasy, and the emperor reluctantly withdrew his order. In this case, however, excessive zeal led Ambrose to neglect the demands of strict justice, for he suggested no possible alternatives for redressing the wrong done.

In 390 several imperial officers were killed in a riot at Thessalonica, and Theodosius, influenced primarily by his Master of the Offices, Rufinus, ordered a savage reprisal that led to the massacre of 7,000 defenseless persons in the circus of the Macedonian city. Ambrose left Milan at the news, but in a letter to the emperor he reproached him for his crime and told him that, under threat of excommunication, he must do public penance. Theodosius complied some months later, even if some of the dramatic details furnished by the historian THEODORET are to be discounted. A few years later (in 392 and 395) Ambrose delivered his great funeral orations on Valentinian II and Theodosius, which contain so much precious information on his part in the political affairs of his time.

**Ambrose as Pastor.** Despite his heavy involvement in political affairs of concern to the Church, Ambrose was a zealous defender of orthodoxy and, above all, a zealous pastor of souls. In his homilies he attacked severely all the social abuses of his age. With the courage and eloquence of a Hebrew Prophet, he denounced especially evil conduct in the upper classes and its deplorable results. But he also expounded theological doctrine very effectively in his homilies. Augustine came to listen to his eloquence, but was led to a new understanding of the Scriptures and of Christian faith by the bishop's explanations (*Confessions* 6.1.1–6.4.6). Augustine was baptized by Ambrose at Easter 386. Ambrose had distributed his own wealth to help the poor and urged others to do the same. Following the battle of Hadrianople in 378, and the subsequent Gothic invasion, he did not scruple to sell the sacred Church vessels to redeem captives. In his advocacy of Christian ideals, he was one of the most zealous and influential promoters of virginity in his age. He gave a

new impetus to the cult of the martyrs with the discovery of two skeletons, which were thought to be those of Gervase and Protase, in the course of the excavations for his own great basilica in 386.

**Writings.** The volume of his extant works is noteworthy when one considers that they were all written in the midst of an extraordinarily demanding episcopate. They often reveal, on the dogmatic and scriptural side, especially, a heavy dependence on Greek works, but the borrowing is freely acknowledged. Ambrose was primarily concerned not with originality but with meeting the practical needs of dogmatic and moral instruction and exhortation. For the most part his treatises were assembled from homilies, and the revision was hastily done. However, he was splendidly trained in Latin literature, and many passages in his works exhibit Christian Latin literary style at its best. Like Leo the Great, he had a happy facility for coining clear and pithy phrases and definitions.

**Exegetical Works.** All his Old Testament exegesis is based essentially on Philo and Origen. Even the most literal of scriptural texts is given an allegorical or typological meaning. In view of the homiletic origin of his exegetical works, moral application is invariably a primary concern. His major contributions are: *Exameron* (six bks.), based on the corresponding work of St. Basil; *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* (ten bks., of which one and two are taken over directly from Origen); and *Expositio in Psalmum 118*. His shorter works include *De Cain et Abel*, *De Noe*, *De Abraham* (two bks.), *De Isaac et anima*, *De bono mortis*, *De Iacob et vita beata* (two bks.), *De Ioseph*, *De patriarchis*, *De fuga saeculi*, *De Helia et ieiunio*, *De Nabuthae*, *De Tobia*, *De interpellatione Iob et David*, *Apologia prophetae David*, and *Explanatio super Psalmos 12*.

**Moral-Ascetical Works.** The *De officiis* (three bks.), written for the clergy of Milan, is the most important. As its title indicates, it is modeled on the corresponding predominantly Stoic treatise of Cicero. However, resemblance is more external than real. The work is thoroughly Christian and, as is usual in Ambrose, relies heavily on Scripture for examples and authority. The other writings in this category are: *De virginibus ad Marcellinam sororem* (three bks.), *De viduis*, *De virginitate*, *De institutione virginis*, and *Exhortatio virginitatis*. In these treatises Ambrose reveals greater independence in developing his arguments in favor of the life of virginity. Through his emphasis on the Blessed Virgin as the ideal and patron of virginity, he is one of the chief founders of devotion to Mary in this respect. The *De lapsu virginis consecratae* is definitely recognized as pseudo-Ambrosian.

**Dogmatic Works.** Three of these are against Arianism: *De fide ad Gratianum* (five bks.), on the divinity of

the Son; *De Spiritu Sancto* (three bks.), based essentially on Didymus the Blind, St. Athanasius, and St. Basil; and *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento*. Three others deal primarily with the exposition of the Sacraments and of the faith to catechumens and are of great importance for the history of the liturgy: *De sacramentis* (six bks.), *De mysteriis*, and *Explanatio symboli*. The last two are now definitely assigned to Ambrose. Finally, he composed the *De paenitentia* to refute Novatianism.

**Orations and Letters.** The two orations *De excessu fratris (Satyri)*, the *De obitu Valentiniani*, and *De obitu Theodosii* are masterpieces of their genre. The invective *Sermo contra Auxentium de basilicis tradendis* is to be regarded also as a formal oration. Only 91 of Ambrose's *Epistulae* are extant. Apart from a few, private letters, they are official or semiofficial in character, or are little exegetical or moral treatises in epistolary form.

**Hymns and Other Works.** Of the numerous hymns ascribed to Ambrose, the *Deus Creator omnium*, *Aeterne rerum conditor*, *Iam surgit hora tertia*, and *Intende, qui regis Israel* are certainly genuine. By these compositions he has justly earned the title "father of liturgical hymnody" in the West. He seems also to have given definitive form to the Exsultet. Several inscriptions and 21 Tituli in verse also have good claims to Ambrosian authorship. The *Hegesippus sive de bello Iudaico* (five bks.), a free translation and adaptation of the *De bello Iudaico* of Flavius Josephus, may be regarded with some probability as being a work from the early life of Ambrose.

**Appreciation.** Ambrose exhibited little originality in the field of dogma or exegesis, but he was a courageous and effective defender of orthodoxy, a great moral teacher, and an exemplary pastor of souls. Above all, he was the first of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church to deal formally with the relations of Church and State. He enunciated the principle that the Church is supreme in its own domain and is the guardian of morality. Even the emperors, despite their lofty dignity and absolutism, are subject to the moral laws as defined and put into practice by the Church. The penance of Theodosius and the principle underlying and demanding it were phenomena found in the sacred history of Israel. However, they were entirely new in the Greco-Roman world, and they were to be of the greatest significance for the future.

Feast: Dec. 7.

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## AMBROSE OF CAHORS, ST.

Bishop?; d. near Bourges, France, c. 770. In the account of his life that has come down to us it is impossible to sort out any certain historical information. According to a doubtful tradition he held his episcopal office at Cahors under PEPIN III the Short. Slandered and persecuted despite his works of charity, he gave up his see and lived for three years in a cave near the Lot River. While returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, he died at Ernotrum (now

Saint-Ambroise-sur-Arnon). His cultus, dating from the tenth century, is perhaps the best evidence for his saintly career.

Feast: Oct. 16.

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## AMBROSE TRAVERSARI, BL.

CAMALDOLESE monk and early Christian humanist; b. Portico, southwest of Ravenna, Sept. 16, 1386; d. Fontebuono, Nov. 17, 1439. He entered the Camaldolese cenobitic monastery, St. Mary of the Angels, at Florence, Oct. 8, 1400, and was professed Nov. 6, 1401. Soon Florentine humanists such as Niccoli, Strozzi, and Cosimo de Medici visited his cell to discuss classical and patristic literature, philosophy, and theology. Ambrose gathered and emended ancient texts and translated many works of the Greek Fathers. He became subprior in January 1431, and prior general of his order on Oct. 26, 1431, because of his interest in reform. The *Hodoeporicon* is a diary of the resulting visitations from December 1431 to 1433. He represented Pope EUGENE IV at the Council of BASEL, and before Emperor SIGISMUND. At Ferrara and Florence in 1438 he effectively employed his knowledge of Greek in negotiating with Byzantine representatives leading to reunion of the Roman and Orthodox Churches.

Feast: Nov. 20.

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## AMBROSIAN CHANT

In addition to textual and structural differences from the Roman rite, the Milanese Church also developed a special repertory of chants, commonly called Ambrosian chant.