

St. Ambrose

One of the Most Important Fathers of our Church

Great scholars and saints consider St. Ambrose among the most excellent preachers in all the history of the Church (Hahn, pg 131). However, there was much more to this Father of the Church than just preaching and we are blessed to have had such leader. His leadership on religious freedom, fighting heresies and morality had a great influence on the Church. He was also instrumental in getting another important Church Father, Saint Augustine, into the faith. St. Augustine speaks of him as “a faithful teacher of the Church, and even at the risk of his life, a most strenuous defender of Catholic truth,” and “whose skill, constancy, labors, and perils, both on account of what he did and what he wrote, the Roman world unhesitatingly proclaims” (Shaffe, loc. 174). St. Ambrose never wavered from his duties and his faith even under the pressure of death. Although he was later honored as both a Doctor of the Faith and Father of the Church, he had a very unusual path to becoming a bishop.

Early Background

St. Ambrose was born into a very wealthy Roman Christian family around A.D. 340. He was from an area called Trier, which is in Southeast Germany. His father, Aurelius, was the Praetorian Prefect of Gaul, which extended over Spain, Britain and the Alpine region. This was one of the four large prefectures under Rome, giving his family much influence and prestige. St. Ambrose had a brother named Satyrus and a sister Marcellina. Both of his siblings were greatly influenced by St. Ambrose and also became saints.

St. Ambrose was well educated in Rome where he studied rhetoric, law and literature. He was known for his intelligence and quickly went into politics, following in his father’s footsteps and earned a spot on a local council. In 372 he became the Consular Prefect of a region

within Milan, which was similar to being a governor. At this time Milan was one of the most important cities within the Roman Empire, giving him a considerable amount of influence. He remained the prefect until 374 when the Arian Bishop of Milan died. He was widely popular and well known at that time.

Transition to Bishop

There had been an ongoing conflict for many years between the Catholic Church and Arianism, particularly in Milan. Arians believed that Jesus was subordinate to God and created by God. This was in direct conflict with the Catholic teaching of the Trinity. In 374, Auxentius, the Bishop of Milan, died and the Arians immediately started pushing to get a bishop friendly to their cause. Since the city was so divided, St. Ambrose felt it necessary to go to the election of the bishop in order to prevent a major uproar of the people and make a plea for peace. He addressed the people but was unexpectedly interrupted with large groups yelling, "Ambrose for bishop!" and he was unanimously selected (Catholic Online). These calls for his installment included people from both the Arians and Catholics, each thinking he would be sympathetic to their side. St. Ambrose initially refused the offer and felt he was not fit for that office. He was not baptized nor trained in theology. However, Emperor Valentinian sent a letter encouraging the appointment and put a tremendous amount of pressure on him to accept. Eventually Ambrose gave in and within a week he was baptized, received first communion, and confirmed. On December 7th, 374 he was ordained as Bishop of Milan. He quickly gave away most of what he owned, only saving enough to help his sister who eventually went into a convent.

He studied theology exhaustively under the instruction of St. Simplician. He was already fluent in Greek, which helped him study the Old Testament and some well known Greek authors. He eventually concentrated on the exegesis of the Old Testament (Catholic Online). He also

quickly started “restoring discipline to the clergy, unity to the Church, and dignity to his office” (Hahn, pg 132).

After earlier years of persecution and then toleration through Constantine’s edict, the Church had a continuing issue, government involvement in Church affairs. It was widely popular with many kings as they felt they were “God’s instrument for bringing about heaven’s kingdom on earth” (Aquilina, pg 164). St. Ambrose felt that there needed to be a strict separation between government and the Church so that the Church could have autonomy on sacred matters. His firm stance on this issue would cause him conflict throughout his life.

Importance to Church Development

St. Ambrose set examples for bishops and priests of all ages on how to conduct themselves. He fought against Arianism, heathenism and secular power. He was also known for his intellect, devotion and generosity of time and goods. He defended orthodoxy wherever he could as he was devoted to the true teachings of the Church. He had a strong devotion to Mary and ardently defended her virginity and role as Mother of God. In matters both of faith and morals, by his words and writings, he greatly benefited the Church and was called by St. Jerome “a pillar of the Church” (Shaffe, loc 174).

His dedication to the true Church teaching and orthodoxy caused him much conflict with the political powers of that time. As time went by St. Ambrose continued to have conflicts with the Arians. He used his gifts as an orator and his newly-found knowledge of Scripture to theologially refute the Arians position. However, the tensions continued to build as various Emperors were taking sides. Then in 381 a synod of thirty two bishops was convened. Ambrose was appointed president and succeeded in pushing out Arianism from within the Church. However the conflict remained and was brought to a head when the government made an attempt

to force Ambrose to give up one of the churches in Milan to the Arians. Emperor Valentinian's mother, a strict Arian, moved to Milan and pushed to have her son give her churches to control (Aquilina, pg. 166). Her son issued the order but Ambrose said, "The Emperor has his palaces, let him leave the churches to the Bishop" (Shaffe, loc 276). St. Ambrose, along with the faithful, occupied the church and did not give into the demands even in the face of death threats. He finally wrote, "If you demand my person, I am ready to submit; carry me to prison or to death, I will not resist but I will never betray the church of Christ...I will die at the foot of the altar rather than desert it" (Catholic Online). He garnished much support and eventually won.

In 390 an Emperor of the East, Theodosius I, killed thousands of people in Thessalonica for going against his reign. St. Ambrose threatened to excommunicate Theodosius if he did not repent. This act could have led to Ambrose's execution, but with his influence and eloquence he won out and Theodosius stopped and repented. The same Emperor was later caught by Ambrose going into the sanctuary which was for clergy alone. Ambrose rebuked him and the emperor immediately left (Shaffe, loc 292).

St. Ambrose had a great influence on many throughout the Church, including St. Augustine. After an introduction through St. Augustine's mother, St. Monica, St. Augustine was quickly attracted to Ambrose's intelligence, oratory and generosity. After guiding and teaching Augustine, Ambrose received him in the Church and baptized him in 387 at Easter. In his book *Confessions*, St. Augustine said, "To him was I unknowingly led by Thee, that by him I might knowingly be led to Thee" (Augustine, pg 77). He went on to say, "I was delighted with the sweetness of his discourse. Called him thy devout servant and among the best of men" (Augustine, pg 77).

St. Ambrose died sometime in the night on Good Friday, April 4, 397. His Feast Day is December 7th and his body is on display in the church of Sant Abrogio Basilica in Milan.

St. Ambrose is one of the Great Fathers of the Church. This is an important designation given to those patriarchs of the faith who demonstrated a special orthodoxy, holiness of life and Church approval. They were critical to the development of early Church doctrine since tradition was still the main means of propagating the faith. The special designation of *Great* was only given to eight of the Fathers of the Church which includes St. Augustine (Aquilina, pg. 15-16).

St. Ambrose is also one of only thirty five people with the title Doctor of the Church. This designation indicates that the writings and preaching of such a person are extremely useful to Christians in any age of the Church. Such men and women are also particularly known for the depth of understanding and the orthodoxy of their theological teachings. The writings of the Doctors are often considered to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. Other important Doctors of our Church include St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Thomas Aquinas. It is inspiring to realize that St. Ambrose went from politics, to bishop, to one of our most important Fathers and Doctors in such a short time frame.

Important Writings and Preaching

St. Ambrose was well known for being a great orator and incredible writer. He preached every Sunday, at great festivals, and at least once a day (Shaffe, Loc 292). He celebrated the Holy Mysteries daily and wrote many letters, books and papers including *De Fide ad Gratianum Augutum* on faith and *De Spiritu Sancto* on the Holy Trinity. He had many other writings including some on the incarnation, mysteries and even on virginity. Although he was known best for his homilies, he was also a teacher (similar to our RCIA) and had many informal conferences to teach wisdom and virtue for priests. On top of all this, “he was the first Westerner

to encourage congregational hymn-singing in Church, writing simple hymns himself' (Aquilina, pg. 166). Below are just a few samples of some of his wonderful words.

From his "Hymns of the Little Hours" - *Come, Holy Ghost, who, ever one, Reignest with Father and with Son. It is the hour, our souls possess with Thy full flood of holiness. Let flesh and heart, and lips and mind, sound forth our witness to mankind; and love light up our mortal frame. Now to the Father, to the Son, and to the Spirit, three in one, be praise and thanks and glory given, by men on earth, by saints in heaven. O God, who cannot change nor fail, guiding the hours as they roll by; brightening with beams the morning pale, and burning in the midday sky. Quench Thou the fires of hate and strife, the wasting fever of the heart; from perils guard our feeble life, and to our souls Thy peace impart* (Aquilina, pg. 174).

From a homily on "Keeping Company with Angels." - *Then you came to the altar. You began to approach; the angels watched. They saw you and your human nature, which before had been stained with the murky filth of sin, suddenly shone bright in their sight. And so they said, "Who is that coming from the wilderness washed so white?" The angels marvel! Do you know what they find so marvelous? The apostle Peter said that you have received things that even the angels long to see; and Paul said, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him".* (Hahn, pg 139)

St. Ambrose accredited his theological success to the Holy Spirit, "Who seals us in our hearts and we receive the outward sign in our bodies. Through the Holy Spirit we receive a share of the grace of adoption. We are perfected by a continual progress in virtue" (Shaffe, loc 191).

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