

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 24

St. Ambrose Takes His Stand

Before we leave the 300's, we need to spend some time discussing St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan.¹ Ambrose fits into the time period of our last class, active both before and after the Council of Constantinople, which finally placed Arianism² into the category of heresy. Ambrose famously took stands based on his faith that could easily have cost him his position, if not his life. I have asked Edward to: (i) discuss Ambrose, (ii) discuss these key life events, and (iii) use some personal examples from his life along with scripture in order to put a contemporary understanding of lessons we might learn and inspirations we might find from our examination of St. Ambrose.

BACKGROUND

Ambrose was born around 339³ in Treves (modern Trier, Germany). He lived about 58 years, dying April 4, 397. His family was of Roman nobility, his father being "Praetorian Prefect" of the Gauls, a high position of authority. Ambrose had one brother and one sister.

While Ambrose was still a young boy, his father died. Ambrose and his siblings were then brought to Rome. In Rome, Ambrose received an excellent education in both law and the broader liberal arts. Latin was the common language for Ambrose, but he was also well trained in Greek both at home and at school. There is some indication that Ambrose's family was originally of Greek origin.

¹ More so than normal, in preparation of this lesson, I am indebted to the New Catholic Encyclopedia, Second Edition.

² In case you missed the classes on Arianism, it was the doctrine/belief that denied the Trinity. It taught that God created Jesus, and while Jesus was greater than normal mankind and God's divine agent for salvation, Jesus was nonetheless lesser than God and was himself a creature. The Council of Nicea (325) was the first broad church effort to brand Arianism as heresy. But, Arianism actually gained strength after Nicea and by 372, the Emperor was Arian, many Bishops were Arian, and there were 12 creeds that were subsequent to the Nicene Creed, each of which were pro-Arian.

³ As with so many others from the early church, we are uncertain of the precise date of Ambrose's birth. At this time in history, people did not celebrate births. Instead, they celebrated deaths! Hence with Ambrose, as with so many others, we do not know with certainty even the year of his birth, but we know his death down to the very day.

Ambrose was reared in a Christian home. His sister went into virgin service to the church (read that “became a nun”). Ambrose, at the age of about 26, started practicing law in a governmental position. Five years later (around 370), Ambrose was appointed governor of several regions in Northern Italy. He lived and headquartered in Milan (which at the time served as the capital of the Roman Empire.)

As an administrator, Ambrose had a sterling reputation for not only his skill, but also his virtue. He was a hard working and honest Governor. The Bishop of Milan at the time was Auxentius, an Arian!!!

When Auxentius died, a serious fight ensued between those we would call orthodox and the Arians regarding who would be named Auxentius’ successor. Should the successor be a Trinitarian or an Arian? As pathetic as it may seem, there were violent confrontations between the two camps on the appropriate successor. As Governor of the region, it fell upon Ambrose to stop the violence and maintain control.

Ambrose must not have been clear in declaring his record on the divinity of Christ, because during this time both sides pressured Ambrose to take on the role of Bishop. Ambrose did not want the job, but ultimately made the decision to accept it anyway. On December 7, 374, Ambrose became the Bishop of Milan.

The first real task Ambrose undertook as Bishop was selling his family wealth and distributing it to the poor and the church. He first set the example of asceticism (living without personal riches or indulgences/conveniences), and then required the same of his other church staff.

Ambrose next set himself to a conscientious study of theology, most of which was then written Greek. God had Ambrose well prepared for this task. Both his studies and his fluency in Greek paved the way for his ease of understanding and study. Ambrose studied many of the people we have covered in this class, including Origen, Athanasius, and Basil of Casarea.

Ambrose wrote a fair bit, especially considering his busy administrative schedule as the Bishop of such a major area. His writings greatly emphasized moral uprightness, even more than he emphasized theology. Ambrose wrote and preached to encourage and exhort his readers to live holy lives before God. We have a great deal of his writings available for reading today, including (i) sermons, (ii) commentaries, (iii) letters, and (iv) even several funerals he preached!

Ambrose did a lot for people, as he was a Pastor who genuinely cared for his flock. Within the confines of church history literacy, however, we need to focus on two major conflicts Ambrose had with the government. In Ambrose - for the first time in history since the Prophets of Israel in the Old Testament - the governmental ruler was called to account by a man of God as being under God's authority.

CONFRONTATION 1: AMBROSE AND JUSTINA

Valentinian ruled the Empire from 383 to 392. Valentinian was a mere boy when he ruled, and the real power behind the throne was his mother, the Empress Justina. Justina was a staunch Arian, and was none too pleased with the decree handed down from the Council of Constantinople that clearly branded Arianism as heresy.

Somehow mixed between Justina's staunch Arian views and her concern over the strong influence Ambrose seemed to have over her son the Emperor, Justina decided to take Ambrose out of the picture. She manipulated a scheme where Ambrose would either be shown a rebel, or would have to capitulate his values that he had recently expressed at the Council of Constantinople.

Justina organized a number of people to demand that Ambrose give one of the church basilicas over to be worshiped by the Arians. Ambrose refused to deliver the basilica and as a result received a summons to the Imperial Palace. The demand on Ambrose to deliver the one church building over was repeated, and again Ambrose refused. Rioting broke out in the city following Ambrose's second refusal, as pressure continued to mount on Ambrose from those folks that Justina had worked behind the scenes.

Several weeks passed, and once more Ambrose was summoned to the Imperial Palace. This time Justina herself confronted Ambrose, blaming Ambrose and his obstinacy for the rioting and civil unrest. One can easily imagine Justina's points to Ambrose: (i) if Ambrose had simply followed his instructions rather than rebelling against the state, (ii) if Ambrose had freed up simply one of the many church buildings for those who saw things slightly different, (iii) if Ambrose had simply remembered that ultimately it was the government who had built many of the churches, then none of the violence and civil unrest would have occurred. Justina then brought down the hammer. Because Ambrose had stubbornly refused to follow orders, Ambrose no longer had a choice of which church building to give to the Arians. Justina required Ambrose to give up his own church building!

Ambrose never hesitated! He curtly proclaimed that he would “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s.” Ambrose then said if Justina demanded Ambrose’s money or property or even clothes, then Ambrose would give them. Ambrose said Justina was demanding what was God’s possession, not Ambrose’s. Ambrose stood on his conviction that he had no authority to give up what belonged to God!

Justina then sent in Imperial troops to forcefully take what she could gain through her orders. The troops clashed with the church members, as the congregants rallied around the buildings and Ambrose. The congregants stood their ground until ultimately the troops withdrew. Justina lost, but did not give up! She went to plan B!

Plan B involved getting her son to sign an edict that - in spite of the Council of Constantinople’s clear ruling of Arianism as heresy - held the official Roman position to be contrary to the Trinitarian view of God. Ambrose was then called to court to justify his teaching and view in light of the new law. To assist in taking on the Bishop (who we should remember had legal training as well as governmental experience), Justina brought in a renegade Bishop who was an Arian.

Ambrose never showed up for court! He refused, explaining his position on the Trinity as well as the propriety of the law. Justina sent for Ambrose’s arrest, but he remained in the church building where the soldiers did not dare enter and arrest him. The forces surrounded the church for days, but Ambrose would not come out. Instead, Ambrose wrote songs for his congregants and taught them antiphonal singing (where one group would sing to a second group which would then respond in song... sort of an early form of singing-in-the-round!).

Ambrose then delivered a forceful sermon using his powerful skills and knowledge as both a preacher and a lawyer. In his sermon, Ambrose appealed not only to scripture, but to the legal system itself in arguing that the church was over the government in issues of morality and doctrine, not the other way around. Soon, the edict was rescinded by public pressure and Justina lost again!

Shortly thereafter, Justina died. Ambrose bore the son no grudge, and in fact became like a father to the son until the son’s murder in 392.

CONFRONTATION 2: AMBROSE AND THEODOSIUS

Theodosius was a Roman general who eventually became Emperor. He and Ambrose had two incidents where Ambrose stood his ground in the face of imperial orders.

In the first instance, some Anti-Semitic church members in Callinicum burned a Jewish synagogue to the ground. Evidently, the local Bishop (not Ambrose) had worked in the background to encourage commission of the arson. Theodosius ordered the church to rebuild the synagogue at the church's expense. Ambrose strongly opposed the order. Ambrose argued that for the church to rebuild the synagogue was an act of apostasy. The Emperor acceded to Ambrose's argument and withdrew the order. Sadly, to our knowledge, Ambrose did not use his legal skill and his creativity to devise an alternative way to see that justice was done, for justice demanded that the synagogue be rebuilt.

The second instance was a first in the history of Rome! Theodosius had participated in a military action that resulted in the slaughter of 7,000 innocent defenseless people in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. Ambrose wrote a strong and blunt letter to the Emperor telling him that the Emperor would be excommunicated from the church unless the Emperor repented publicly and did penance publicly! The bizarre part? The Emperor complied and did his public penance!

POINTS FOR HOME

With this introduction to an imperfect yet extraordinary man, we have Edward to give us some personal examples of God honoring those decision points in life where we choose which path to follow.

1. In all your ways, acknowledge God and he will make your paths straight.