



December 7

Commemoration: Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397

AMBROSE of MILAN (c. 340–397)

*Bishop of Milan (northern Italy)*

One of the great leaders and teachers of the Western Church; born of a rich and noble Roman family at Treves c. 340; died at Milan Apr. 4, 397. He was educated in Rome for the bar, and about 370 was appointed consular prefect for Upper Italy and took up his residence at Milan. In 374 a fierce contest arose in the city between the orthodox and the Arian parties concerning the election of a bishop to succeed Auxentius. Ambrose, as the first magistrate, went to the church to maintain order and was himself by unanimous vote transferred from his official position to the episcopal chair. Though only a neophyte, he was immediately baptized, and, eight days afterward (Dec. 7, 374) was consecrated bishop. As a leader of the Church Ambrose distinguished himself by his support of the orthodox faith. In 379 he succeeded in establishing an orthodox bishop at Sirmium in spite of the efforts of the Arian empress Justina. In 385-386 he refused to deliver up a basilica in Milan to the empress for Arian worship. These contests with [Arianism](#) he has reported himself in his letters to his sister Marcellina and to the Emperor Valentinian II., and in his oration *De basilicis tradendis*. Also with the Roman monk Jovinian he had a sharp controversy.

Ambrose opposed paganism no less zealously than heresy. In the senate hall at Rome stood an altar to Victory on which all oaths were taken. In 382 Gratian had this altar removed, probably at the instigation of Ambrose. The senate, which favored the old religion, made repeated efforts to have the altar restored, under Gratian, Valentinian II., and Theodosius, but unsuccessfully owing to Ambrose's opposition. On the other hand, he held that the State, though it might interfere with paganism, must not interfere with the Church. In 388 the Christians burned a synagogue at Callinicum in Mesopotamia and Theodosius ordered that it be rebuilt at the expense of the bishop of the place, but Ambrose induced the emperor to recall the order. In 370 the people of Thessalonica during a riot murdered the military governor, and Theodosius retaliated with a fearful massacre; Ambrose rebuked the emperor and counseled him to do public penance.

As a teacher of the Church Ambrose concerned himself more with practical and ethical than with metaphysical questions; his writings are rich in striking practical remarks, but not original. Of his dogmatical works the *De mysteriis* reminds of Cyril of Jerusalem and the *De fide* and *De spiritu sancto* follow Basil very closely. Concerning the question of sin, Ambrose stands nearer to Augustine than the earlier Western Fathers or the Eastern theologians, but is more in accord with the earlier than with the later views of the great teacher. His exegetical works are mostly founded upon Basil and are marred by the allegorical method; their chief and best characteristic is their practical tendency. The same thing may be said of his sermons, which exhibit the full worth of the true Roman gentleman. Among his moral and ascetic works are *De officiis ministrorum* (modeled upon Cicero), *De virginibus*, *De viduis*, *De virginitate*, etc. The growing tendency toward asceticism shows itself in the high value he attached to celibacy, the martyr's death, and voluntary poverty; and the notion of a higher and purer Christian life to be attained by such means betrays the influence of the Stoic moral theory which he found in his model. Ambrose introduced a comprehensive reform in Church music (see Ambrosian Chant); and a liturgy long used in the diocese of Milan is associated with his name by tradition. Of the hymns ascribed to him not more than four or five are genuine, and the *Te Deum* is not in this number. His extant works also include ninety-one letters.

Ambrose was buried in the Ambrosian basilica at Milan near the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius. In the ninth century Archbishop Angilbert II. placed the remains of the three in a porphyry sarcophagus, which was discovered in 1864, and opened in 1871

St. Ambrose, by Francisco de Zurbarán