

Adult Education – St. Luke’s Church – Sedona, AZ – Class 18
Introduction to the Doctors of the Church – St. Ambrose of Milan
October 13, 2019

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Saint Ambrose

I. Opening Prayer

Grant, we beseech thee, O Lord, that we remembering with gladness the righteousness of thy Saints, may at all times and in all places feel the effectual succor of their intercession. Through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord. Who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. **Amen.** (*Secret, Common of a Confessor Bishop, Anglican Missal, p. F23.*)

II. What is a Doctor of the Church?

- “In the first millennium certain Christian teachers and writers who displayed exceptional wisdom and ability to explain Jesus Christ and His message are referred to as Fathers of the Church.” (*The 35 Doctors of the Church*)
- Some within that group were popularly called “doctors” before the title was formalized
- Three requirements for the formal title of Doctor were eventually developed:
 - Holiness in life
 - Importance and orthodoxy of writings
 - Official recognition by the Church
 - Note: must be declared a Saint before being proclaimed a Doctor

III. Some Interesting Statistics

- To date, 36 Saints have been proclaimed Doctors of the Church
 - 27 from the West
 - 9 from the East
 - 4 women (St. Teresa of Avila; St. Catherine of Sienna; St. Thérèse of Lisieux; St. Hildegard of Bingen)
 - 18 Bishops
 - 12 Priests
 - **1 Deacon** (St. Ephraem Syrus)
 - 3 Nuns
 - 1 Consecrated Virgin
- More Doctors (12) lived in the 4th century than any other
- The shortest period from death to proclamation: 84 years (St. Alphonsus Liguori: 1787-1871)
- The longest period from death to proclamation: 15½ centuries (Deacon Ephraem Syrus: 306-1920)
- Most recent proclamation: St. Gregory of Narek: 1003-2015 (controversial)
- Complete list: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_of_the_Church

IV. The Early Latin and Greek Fathers

- In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed the first four Doctors of the Church, commonly known as the Early Latin Fathers
 - St. Ambrose (340-397)
 - St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430)
 - St. Jerome (343-420)
 - St. Gregory the Great (560-430)
 - (In 1567, Pope Pius proclaimed St. Thomas Aquinas to be a Doctor worthy of being ranked with the Early Latin Fathers)
- In 1568, Pope Pius V proclaimed the next four Doctors of the Church, commonly known as the Early Greek Fathers
 - St. Athanasius (297-373)
 - St. John Chrysostom (347-407)
 - St. Basil the Great (329-379)
 - St. Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390)

V. St. Ambrose – Vital Statistics

- Ambrose was born c.340 A.D. – fifteen years after the first Council of Nicaea – to a wealthy and well-educated Christian Roman family. His father was a highly placed government official, and his mother came from a well-regarded family
- He had an older sister (Marcellina- who hugely influenced his views on virginity) and an older brother (Satyrus), both of whom are also venerated today as Saints
- According to legend, a swarm of bees landed on Ambrose’s face when he was an infant and left a drop of honey, foreshadowing – to his father – Ambrose’s future eloquence as an orator. (This explains why pictures of Ambrose often include a beehive.)

- As an adult, he was short, long faced with a high forehead, had short hair and a drooping mustache
- He had a courteous and charming manner
- He was Bishop of Milan for 23 years (374-397)
- He died on Holy Saturday, April 4, 397, and he was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church 901 years later in 1298
- Unlike most Saints, whose Feasts are normally observed on the day of their death, Ambrose's Feast is celebrated on the day of his consecration: December 7.
- He is frequently referred to as the Patron of the Veneration of Mary, and he is often listed as the patron Saint of beekeepers, bishops and learning (although other Saints are often associated with the latter two categories)

VI. Successful Politician

- Following the early death of his father, Ambrose studied literature, law and rhetoric in Rome
- He was first appointed to the council and was later appointed Prefect (analogous to "governor") of Liguria and Emilia, headquartered in Milan (northern Italy)
- He was highly regarded for his wise, even-handed administration of the region
- By 374, at age 34, Ambrose clearly had a promising and lucrative public career ahead of him, and he was well known by then-Emperor Valentinian I

VII. Reluctant Bishop

- Everything changed for Ambrose when – in 373 or 374 – the Arian bishop of Milan (Auxentius) died
- A dispute between the Nicene Christians and the Arians as to who should be named Auxentius' successor grew increasingly rancorous
- As governor, Ambrose went to the Basilica to maintain order. Although a catechumen within the Nicene faith, Ambrose was highly regarded by both sides of the dispute because of his reputation for fairness, his excellent administrative skills, and his personal morality and uprightness
- It is reported that while he was at the Basilica, a child's voice could be heard above the crowd crying "Ambrose – bishop!"
- Having no desire to be bishop, Ambrose eventually took refuge in the country house of a friend. However, a letter of approval from Emperor Valentinian and threat of punishment for anyone who concealed Ambrose was enough motivation for the friend to turn Ambrose over
- Although Ambrose was a Christian catechumen, he had never been baptized, following the then-common practice of deferring baptism until just before death in order to avoid committing mortal sin following baptism
- Thus – despite canons prohibiting such a practice – the consecrating bishops made an exception, and he was baptized in late November, received Minor Orders on successive days and was consecrated Bishop of Milan on December 7

VIII. Model Bishop

- Ambrose's first act as Bishop was to sell all his land and give the proceeds to the Church
- He also gave all his gold and silver to the poor, making provision only for his sister Marcellina
- His older brother, Satyrus, gave up his government post in order to attend to Ambrose's temporal affairs
- Ambrose then undertook an intense regimen of study so that he could teach his flock as he also learned. (Today, we would say he was drinking from a firehose!)
- He fasted five(!) days a week
- He maintained an open-door policy, which resulted in numerous interruptions throughout the day, as he received everyone from high government officials to lowly parishioners hoping to make a confession
- His knowledge of Greek – something which St. Augustine sorely lacked – proved to be exceedingly valuable in helping to understand and selectively incorporate the teachings of the Greek Fathers
- In 390, he denounced then-Emperor Theodosius for ordering the slaughter of 7,000(!) Thessalonians attending the local circus. Ambrose essentially excommunicated Theodosius by refusing to conduct the Mass in Theodosius' presence unless he publicly repented. (See the link to Ambrose's letter to Theodosius in Section XI below)
- Theodosius came to the Basilica, removed all signs of imperial power, prostrated himself and begged the people to pray for him
- Convinced eventually that Theodosius was sincere, Ambrose re-admitted him to the Mass
- Historically, this event is highly significant because it was the first time a bishop had asserted the right to judge, punish and pardon a head of state – no less than the Roman Emperor!

IX. Defender of the Faith

- Despite the adoption of the Nicene Creed in 325 at the Council of Nicaea, the Arian lingered on for many decades.
- In Ambrose's day, Arians were particularly numerous in the upper class
- In 386, when Empress Justina (an Arian) demanded that Ambrose surrender the Basilica in Milan – and another church outside the city walls – to the Arians, Ambrose refused and took refuge in the Basilica along with many of the parishioners. The siege lasted from Palm Sunday through Holy Week. (See St. Augustine's description in Section XII below.)
- The government relented, and under Ambrose's influence, Emperors Gratian and Theodosius also took up the defense against Arianism
- Through his persuasive powers, along with Theodosius' victory over the Arbogastes, Ambrose also brought an effective end to paganism throughout the Empire

X. Gifted Orator

- Ambrose was widely known for his gift of oratory
- Augustine – who placed immense value on the gift of rhetoric – was influenced by his mother, Monica, to listen to hear Ambrose in person. Augustine was not immediately converted, but over time Ambrose's rhetoric worked its magic on him.

- Ambrose baptized Augustine on Easter morning in 387

XI. Author and Theologian

- As with nearly all other Doctors of the Church, St. Ambrose wrote voluminously (in his limited spare time, usually in the evening)
- His passionate advocacy of virginity and celibacy caused no little stir in his day. Many mothers prohibited their daughters from listening to Ambrose, fearing his excellent rhetoric would steer their daughters away from marriage
- To be fair, Ambrose did also write favorably about marriage
- He is not identified with any particular work (like Augustine’s *Confessions* or Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*), but their collective impact has been significant
- All of his writings, except for a few letters, may be accessed via the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.toc.html>)
 - On the Christian Faith (5 books)
 - On the Holy Spirit (3 books)
 - On the Mysteries
 - On Repentance (2 books)
 - On the Duties of the Clergy (3 books)
 - Concerning Virgins (3 books)
 - Concerning Widows
 - On the Death of [His Brother] Satyrus (2 books)
 - Memorial of Symmachus
 - Sermon against Auxentius
 - Selected Letters
 - See especially: Letter LI – To Theodosius after the Massacre at Thessalonica (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.v.xi.html>)
- His hugely important stance against Arianism was effected less by word than by deed
- He was also influential in the early development of the theological understanding of Mary’s role and status
- He viewed giving to the poor not as an act of generosity but as an act returning what had been usurped from them. (“All things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we given thee.”)

XII. Poet and Composer

- Borrowing from practice in the Eastern Church, St. Ambrose is widely credited with being among the first – if not the first – to promote the use of office hymns in daily worship in the Western church. As St. Augustine notes in the quote below, this practice spread quickly throughout the West
- “His simple yet lofty Christian poetry created a new literary form, the rhymical hymn, and the metre which he employed...is known as Ambrosian.” (*Hymnal Companion*, p. 113)
- The “Ambrosian rite” survives to this day in Milan and the surrounding region
- St. Augustine records how important this hymn singing became when Ambrose and his congregation were under siege:
 - “For it was about a year, or not much more, since Justina, the mother of the boy-emperor Valentinian, persecuted thy servant Ambrose in the interest of her heresy, to which she had been seduced by the Arians. The pious people kept guard

in the church, prepared to die with their bishop, thy servant. There my mother [Monica], thy handmaid, bearing a chief part of those cares and watchings, lived in prayer. We [Augustine and his companions], still unmelted by the heat of thy Spirit, were yet moved by the astonished and disturbed city. At this time it was instituted that, after the manner of the Eastern Church, hymns and psalms should be sung, lest the people should pine away in the tediousness of sorrow; **which custom, retained from then til now is imitated by many, yea, by almost all of thy congregations throughout the rest of the world.**' (*Hymnal Companion*, p. 545, quoting *Confessions*, IX, 7)

- The 1940 *Hymnal* contains several works attributed wholly or partially to St. Ambrose:
 - Author and possible composer
 - 132 The eternal gifts of Christ the King
 - 158 O Splendor of God's glory bright
 - Possible author and composer
 - 160 Come, Holy Ghost, with God the Son
 - 161 O God of truth, O Lord of might
 - 162 O God, creation's secret force
- Regarding Hymn 158, the 1940 *Hymnal Companion* (p. 116) states that "[t]he Ambrosian authorship of this hymn has never been disputed to any great extent." It was traditionally the office hymn for Lauds (at daybreak)
 - Choral version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz-VHmNBCww&list=PLQ9-50qJL_DYrW6TMuruklCZJz2k5Jxfn&index=3
 - Piano version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Tt7-wCbjkM>

XIII. Closing Prayer

O God by whose providence Saint Ambrose was sent to guide thy people in the way of everlasting salvation: grant, we beseech thee; that as we have learned of him the doctrine of life on earth, so we may be found worthy to have him for our advocate in heaven. Through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord. Who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. **Amen.** (*Collect for the Feast of St. Ambrose*, Anglican Missal, p. E8.)

XIV. Sources

- Ambrose: Selected Works and Letters (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.toc.html>) (Christian Classics Ethereal Library)
- Catholic Encyclopedia: Doctors of the Church (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05075a.htm>).
- Protestant Episcopal Church. *The Hymnal 1940 Companion (Second Edition, Revised)*. NY: Church Pension Fund 1951.
- Rengers, C. *The 35 Doctors of the Church (revised ed.) Kindle Edition*. Charlotte, NC: TAN Books 2014.
- Schaff, P. (ed.) *The Complete Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Collection of Early Church Fathers: Cross-Linked to the Bible. Kindle Edition*. Amazon Digital Services 2016.
- Schaff, P. (ed.) *The Complete Works of St. Ambrose (Kindle Edition)*. Amazon Digital Services 2016.

Next week: Augustine of Hippo.

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