

ST AMBROSE – DOCTRINE AND IMPORTANCE

The doctrine of St Ambrose centres around three main themes: the Church, morality, dogmatic questions.

INDEPENDENCE AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH

St Ambrose is the Doctor of the Independence and the Unity of the Church. In his time the question of relations of Church and State was particularly acute. His activity in this field was very successful. The Church's independence from the state may be summarised, according to his teaching, in three main principles.

The Church is independent of the State in its own domain. Ambrose made the Emperors, particularly Theodosius, accept this principle. He made a clear distinction between 'respublica' and 'religio'. The former is the State, the latter possesses the right to liberty, especially questions of faith ('in causa fidei'). This liberty undoubtedly implied that the Church be emancipated in her representatives, i.e. the bishops ('sacerdotium') and the hierarchy ('ordo ecclesiasticus'), from State supervision and secular authority. He claimed for the Church the authority of the 'ius ecclesiasticum', the 'ius sacerdotale', i.e. the bishops' right to be judged exclusively by their fellow bishops. He even said that the Emperors are subject to the bishops in matters of faith. Finally, churches and ecclesiastical buildings are not subject to the Emperors' authority: Emperors cannot dispose of them freely as if they were public buildings. 'Ea quae sunt divina Imperatoriae potestati non sunt subjecta' (*Ep.* 20, 8; *P.L.* 16, 997). 'Ad Imperatorem palatia pertinent, ad sacerdotem ecclesiae' (*Ep.* 20, 19; *P.L.* 16, 999).

The Church is the guardian of the moral law. It is the right and the duty of the Church to make everyone, including princes, submit to this law. There was an incident at Thessalonica; its consequences showed that it was not useless that the Church used the spiritual weapon of excommunication, even in a matter not specifically religious, but moral in nature. This indirect authority of the Church over the Emperors was not intended to lessen their political rights. Ambrose aptly remarks that the Emperors envy the priestly body far more than the bishops envy the State. 'Vulgo dici quod Imperatores sacerdotium magis optaverint, quam Imperium

sacerdotes.' (*Ep.* 20, 23; *P.L.* 16, 1001) This whole question may be summarised by the famous expression: 'Imperator enim intra Ecclesiam non supra Ecclesiam est' (*Sermo contr. Aux.* 36; *P.L.* 16, 1018). This should be taken as applying to the religious and moral context in which it was conceived.

The Church has the right to be protected by the State. Ambrose obtained for the Church privileges which were refused to other churches. He blamed the violent treatment imposed on Priscillianus at the request of the Spanish bishops, even though this was legal. He surely was against shedding blood in religious quarrels. (*Ep.* 26, 3; *P.L.* 16, 1042) As regards the conversion of the Arians, his trust was in the intellectual and moral influence of the Catholics. (*De fide* III, xi, 89; *P.L.* 16, 579). He kept on friendly terms with the pagans, several of whom remained in Roman administration.

Having seen three of the important aspects of Ambrose's teaching on the independence of the Church, I shall now turn my attention to the unity of the Church. The one was as dear to him as the other. The centre of this unity was found in the Roman Apostolic See. 'Ubi ergo Petrus, ibi Ecclesia; ubi Ecclesia, nulla mors, sed vita aeterna' (*In Psalm.* XL, 30). The Novitian schismatics, separated from the Church and the See of Peter, have no part in its patrimony. The Christians who possess 'the grace of the true faith' are in communion 'with the Catholic bishops, that is with the Church of Rome' (*De Excessu fratris sui Satyri* I, 47; *P.L.* 16, 1306). In a letter to the Emperors he declares:

Totius orbis Romani caput Romanam Ecclesiam atque illam sacrosanctam, Apostolicam (Apostolorum) fidem, ne turbari sineret, obsecranda fuit clementia vestra: inde enim in omnes venerandae communionis iura dimanarunt.

(*Ep.* 11, 4; *P.L.* 16, 946)

The Roman Church is the centre of Christian unity.

Theodosius was in agreement with Ambrose in his ideas on the independence and unity of the Church. What was wrong was that the Eastern bishops who worked with Theodosius had different ideas. The Church was losing its unity. Nectarius of Constantinople was not strong enough. After him came Chrysostom, who was a man of ideas as well as of practice, but the Emperor's court was not as well disposed as that of Theodosius. Ambrose's labour did not produce in the East the good results it did in the West. But his ideas were an example and an inspiration to many,

especially to the Popes, like St Leo and St Gelasius in the fifth century. The revival of the ideal of Christian society in the Middle Ages derived from Ambrose's teaching.

AMBROSE THE MORALIST

It is very difficult to decide whether Ambrose wanted to give the literal meaning of the Biblical passages he chose for his teaching. In any case, his exegesis, so heavy with its allegories, is weak. What is valuable in his Scriptural works is the explanation of Christian morality. This is generally based on an event or a person in the Biblical narrative.

The principles of his moral teaching are found in *De Officiis*. In this work Ambrose quotes the philosophers, and more often the Scriptures, quotations from which are found in every page. He retained the general outline of Cicero and he adopted several ideas of the early schools, particularly Stoicism, such as sovereign good, distinction of reason and the passions, classification of the four moral virtues. However, he was far more astonished by their deficiencies than by the inspiration he found in them.

The religious character of Ambrose's morality is evident throughout. Its foundation is in the faith which is expressed in Christ, on Whom the Church is founded. In brief, for Ambrose, morality is based on the one hand of God, whose will is the criterion of duty, and on the other hand on the Church, which is the social form of justice since in the Church rights, prayer, work and trials are shared together.

Ambrose often worked on and perfected what the philosophers had said. Like the Stoics he made a difference between relative duty (καθήκον) and absolute duty (κατόρθωμα). He gave to these an entirely Christian meaning. The teaching of the last end or sovereign good was known to all philosophers. Cicero in *De Officiis* Book II says that the best means to obtain happiness in this world is virtue which is the means to obtain men's respect as well as their assistance. St Ambrose corrected and perfected this. He based his argument on the Gospel saying that no happiness can exist except in eternal life. Thus the things of this world which lead to happiness often act as a hindrance. Moreover, life of blessedness partly begins in this world with peace of conscience.

The bishop of Milan shows the superiority of Christ's teaching over the philosophers' in explaining special virtues. First of all, he explains the four fundamental virtues which are the sources of morality: wisdom, justice, fortitude, temperance. Wisdom or pru-

dence seeks truth. Justice plans the duties towards God, the State, parents and towards all men. Fortitude, Ambrose explains, makes one condemn exteriority and aids one accomplish great undertakings. Temperance is 'tranquillitas animi, studium mansuetudinis, moderationis gratia, honesti cura, decoris consideratio'. To each of these virtues Ambrose dedicates a chapter in *De Officiis*.

St Ambrose exhorts the clergy to particularly chastity and to youth modesty. To Christian preachers he gives some wise counsels on exterior behaviour.

But he particularly surpasses the pagan philosophers when he speaks of the duties towards God and one's neighbour. Cicero never mentions the duties of religion; for the Christian these are fundamental. 'Neighbour' for Cicero meant little except the high Roman aristocracy. On the contrary St Ambrose dealt at length in Book II with the duties of charity, beneficence and hospitality.

Ambrose's moral doctrine was connected with asceticism, the means which are adapted to the attainment of holiness. He never denied that marriage is good, but virginity is superior to marriage. Virginity leads the soul to the mystical marriage with Christ and it makes angels of souls. He exhorts virgins to seek Christ, to strive to know Him, which is an effect of prayer, so necessary to virgins (cf. *De virginibus, De virginitate, Exhort. Virg.*). Virginity is a heavenly gift; it is a pilgrim in this world; its true home is heaven: 'Si enim ibi est patria, ubi genitale domicilium, in caelo profecto est patria castitatis. Itaque hic advena, ibi incola est' (*De virginibus, I, v, 20*).

The state of virginity is in some way a divine institution; it was founded by Mary. She is the model of purity, because she remained a virgin, even in the divine birth and until the end of her life. At that time this was being discussed: Ambrose deals with this controversy with tender piety. His treatise, *De institutione Virginis*, is one of the early writings which spread the devotion to Mary in the Church.

The ascetism of St Ambrose, especially his teaching on virginity, is inspired by a true mysticism. This is particularly true when one meditates on the thoughts of Our Lord which he scatters everywhere in his works. I quote an example from *De Virginitate* (XVI, 96):

Si vulnus curare desideras, medicus est; si febris aestuas, fons est; si gravis iniquitate, iustitia est; si auxilio indiges,

virtus est; si mortem times, vita est; si caelus desideras, via est; si tenebras fugis, lux est; si cibum quaesis, alimentum est. Gustate igitur et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus: beatus vir qui sperat in eo (Ps. 33, 9).

AMBROSE THE THEOLOGIAN

Ambrose was not a theologian in the strict sense: no elaboration of an original idea accompanied by philosophical speculation on one of the mysteries proposed by faith can be found in his works. What he required was a theology which would serve his moral teaching. He dealt explicitly with four special aspects: the Trinity, Christology, the Sacraments, Eschatology.

The Trinity. The bishop of Milan conceives the mystery of the Trinity in the Oriental manner. He puts Persons before Nature. The Father is the principle of the other Persons. The Father is the 'source', the 'root' of the Son. The Second Person is the Son since He is 'engendered', and the Word since He is 'spiritually' produced. He is born by reason of a natural necessity. The Son is the 'source' of the Holy Ghost. There is no inequality between the Persons.

Christology. Ambrose sees in Christ the existence of two truly distinct natures and two wills. But he affirms that Christ is really one: in Him may not be distinguished He who is 'from the Father' and He who is born 'of the Virgin' (*De Incarn. Dom. Sac.* 35). St Ambrose explains the Redemption by the realist theory of expiation and satisfaction. Christ offered Himself to the Father of his free will in order to ransom us superabundantly by his blood.

The Sacraments. Ambrose developed his teaching on the sacraments in *De mysteriis*. He distinguishes between the rite and the grace produced in the person who receives the sacrament. He says that the Eucharist is the conversion of the nature of the bread and of the nature of the wine; this conversion is produced by the words of Christ at the Last Supper. He wrote on the sacrament of Penance in *De Paenitentia*. He says that this is necessary not for *delicta leviora*, which may be removed by good works, but it is necessary for *delicta graviora*, for which public penance is done and which can be received only once. It consists of three parts: (a) secret confession to the bishop or a priest, who gives the penance to be done; (b) exomologesis or public expiation by which satisfaction is given by the sinner to God before the Church; (c) solemn reconciliation by the laying on of hands by the bishop on Holy Saturday. Ambrose at the beginning of his work strongly

affirms against the Novatians, the efficacy of the pardon accorded by the priests in the name of God.

Eschatology. Ambrose thinks that not all the just will be given the beatific vision before the resurrection; this privilege is granted only to a few great saints of the two Testaments, patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs. Ambrose distinguishes four or five degrees in the resurrection until souls are perfectly purified by passing through fire. The elect enter eternal happiness only by degrees. He exaggerated the efficacy of faith when he said that all Christians, including infidels and apostates, will finally be saved by their faith. Apart from this, his teaching contains the gist of the present teaching of the Church on purgatory. It was the genius of St Augustine who clarified these principles based on Scripture and tradition.

St Ambrose is remembered for his holy life. This did not prevent him from taking an active part in the life of the Church. He did this partly by his preaching, partly by his writings. His writings, as we saw, centre round three main themes: the Church, morality, theology.

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