

# 11 Ambrose of Milan: On the Christian Faith

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## 11.1 Introduction to Ambrose and 'On the Christian Faith' (OCF)

### **11.1.1 Who was Ambrose?**

Ambrose (ca. 337/340 – 4 April 397) was a bishop of Milan who became one of the most influential ecclesiastical figures of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. He is counted as one of the four original doctors of the Western Church. (The others being Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, and Pope Gregory I. The four Great Doctors of the Eastern Church are John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Athanasius of Alexandria). Ambrose played a very important role in the conversion of St Augustine.

### **11.1.2 Political career (372-374)**

Ambrose was born into a Roman Christian family between about 337 and 340 and was raised in Trier. His father was Ambrosius Aurelianus, the praetorian prefect of Gallia, i.e. France, England, Spain and Northwest Africa; his mother was a woman of intellect and piety. After the early death of his father, Ambrose followed his father's political career. He was educated in Rome, studying literature, law, and rhetoric.



In about 372 he was appointed consular "Governor" of Liguria and Emilia, with headquarters at Milan, which was then (beside Rome) the second capital in Italy. He was a very popular political figure, and since he was the Governor in the effective capital in the Roman West, he was a recognizable figure in the court of the Emperor Valentinian I.

### **11.1.3 Bishop (374-397)**

In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century there was a deep conflict in the diocese of Milan between the Catholics and Arians. In 374 the bishop of Milan, Auxentius, an Arian, died, and the Arians challenged the succession. Ambrose went to the church where the election was to take place, to prevent uproar, which was probable in this crisis. His address was interrupted by a call 'Ambrose, bishop!', which was taken up by the whole assembly.

He was known to be Catholic in belief, but also acceptable to Arians due to the charity shown in theological matters in this regard. He refused the office, for which he was in no way prepared: Ambrose was neither baptized nor formally trained in theology.

Upon his appointment, St. Ambrose fled to a colleague's home to seek hiding. Upon receiving a letter from the Emperor Gratian praising the appropriateness of Rome appointing individuals evidently worthy of holy positions, St. Ambrose's host gave Ambrose up. Within a week, Ambrose was baptized, ordained and duly consecrated bishop of Milan. As bishop, he immediately adopted an ascetic lifestyle.

Ambrose's intense Episcopal consciousness furthered the growing doctrine of the Church and its sacerdotal ministry, while the prevalent asceticism of the day, continuing the Stoic and Ciceronian training of his youth, enabled him to promulgate a lofty standard of Christian ethics.

Ambrose displayed a kind of liturgical flexibility that kept in mind that liturgy was a tool to serve people in worshiping God, and ought not to become a rigid entity that is invariable from place to place. His advice to Augustine of Hippo on this point was to follow local liturgical custom. "When I am at Rome, I fast on a Saturday; when I am at Milan, I do not. Follow the custom of the church where you are." Thus Ambrose refused to be drawn into a false conflict over which particular local church had the "right" liturgical form where there was no substantial problem. His advice has remained in the English language as the saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Due to his initial political career and the respect Ambrose enjoyed as a bishop, he related to the Roman Emperors of his days, and his viewpoints were usually respected. This enabled him to stop a resurgence of pagan religion; in order to achieve this, he even stopped the celebration of Eucharist in Milan. He also battled against a friendly attitude of the Empire towards Judaism.

### **11.1.5 Writings of Ambrose**

In matters of exegesis he is an Alexandrian. In dogma he follows Basil of Caesarea and other Greek authors, but nevertheless gives a distinctly Western cast to their theology. This is particularly manifest in the weightier

emphasis that he lays upon human sin and divine grace, and in the place that he assigns to faith in the individual Christian life. St Ambrose wrote (and we still have!) dozens of books on theology and ethics. We also have 91 of his letters, and a collection of hymns.

### **11.1.6 Introduction to OCF**

Ambrose wrote *On the Christian Faith* (also known as *On the Trinity*) at the request of Emperor Gratian of the Western part of the Roman Empire. Gratian wanted a treatise on the divinity of Jesus Christ as he was about to travel to the East, where Arianism at that time (378) had gained the upper hand of Orthodoxy. Gratian felt in need of some inner strengthening against Arian arguments. So Ambrose wrote the first two chapters of what we now call OCF. After Gratian returned from the East, he asked Ambrose for additional books, namely in the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Ambrose wrote those requested books in 379, but he focused on combating new arguments that were used by the Arians. These new writings form the chapters 3-5 of OCF.

## **11.2 Content of OCF**

### **11.2.1 introduction**

- > **Read together:** Book III, chapter 1:1-2 (page 10 in the book)
- > **Discuss together** what reasons Ambrose gives for writing this book.

### **11.2.2 Was the Son created?**

- > **Read in groups:** Book III, chapter 7:46-50 (page 29-31 in the book)
- > **Discuss together** how Ambrose argues that the Son is not created

### **11.2.3 A child is born, a son is given**

- > **Read in groups:** Book III, chapter 8:54-58 (page 32-35 in the book)
- > **Discuss together** how Ambrose uses the verse from Isaiah 9:6 to argue the Orthodox case.

### **11.2.4 Begotten, not made**

- > **Read together:** Book III, chapter 11:76-84 (page 43-46 in the book)
- > **Discuss together** how Ambrose argues that the Son of God was begotten, not made.

### **11.2.5 Jesus standing before the throne**

- > **Read personally:** Book III, chapter 17:137-142 (page 65-67 in the book)
- > **Discuss together** how Ambrose dismisses the Arian argument that the fact that Jesus 'stands' beside the throne of God, means that he is not himself God.

### **11.2.6 The Son and the Father are of the same substance**

- > **Read together:** Book IV, chapter 3:28-38 (page 76-80 in the book)
- > **Discuss together** how Ambrose shows that the Arian reference to 1 Corinthians 11:3 does not help them.

### **11.2.5 The Son can do nothing of himself**

- > **Read together:** Book IV, chapter 4:39-6:76 (page 80-94 in the book)
- > **Discuss together** how Ambrose shows that John 5:19 does not undermine the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, but rather underlines it.