

Ambrose of Milan: On the Christian Faith

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

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

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 4th 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.

1.2 Political career (372-374)

Ambrose was born into a Roman Christian family between about 337 and 340 and was raised in Trier (Germany). 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 in his father's political footsteps. He had been 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, after Rome, the second capital in Italy. He was a very popular political figure, and since he was the Governor in the factual capital in the Roman West, he was a respected figure in the court of Emperor Valentinian I.

1.3 Bishop (374-397)

In the late 4th century there was a deep conflict in the diocese of Milan between the

Catholics and the Arians. In 374, the Arian bishop of Milan, Auxentius, died, and the Arians challenged the succession. The politician Ambrose went to the church where the election



was to take place, to prevent the uproar that 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.

To avoid being forced to this appointment, St. Ambrose fled to a colleague's home to seek a hiding place. 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 him up.

Within a week, Ambrose was baptized, ordained and duly consecrated bishop of Milan. As bishop, he immediately adopted an ascetic lifestyle.

With his intense Episcopal consciousness, Ambrose furthered the doctrine of the Church and its sacramental ministry. His ascetism was a continuation of the Stoic and Ciceronian training of his youth; it enabled him to promote 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 with ease, and his viewpoints were usually respected. This enabled him to stop a resurgence of pagan religion. He also battled against a too friendly attitude of the Empire towards Judaism.

1.5 Writings of Ambrose

In matters of exegesis Ambrose was an Alexandrian - he liberally allegorized. In dogma he followed the Trinitarian theology of Basil of Caesarea and other Greek authors, but he gave a distinctly Western (more legal, less mystical) cast to their theology. This is particularly manifest in the weightier emphasis that he lays upon human sin and divine grace.

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.

1.6 Introduction to OCF

Ambrose wrote *On the Christian Faith* (also known as *On the Trinity*) at the request of Emperor Gratian (ruled 367 to 383) 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 over 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 on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Ambrose wrote those requested books in 379, in which he focused on combating new arguments that were used by the Arians. These new writings form the chapters 3-5 of OCF.

2. On the Christian Faith (OCF)

2.1 introduction

> **Read together:** Prologue 1-5 (pages 7-8 in the book)

> **Discuss together** what reasons Ambrose gives for writing this book.

2.2 Was the Son created?

> **Read in a small group:** Chapter 7:48-53 (pages 18-20 in the book)

> **Let someone from the group**, as if he/she is Ambrose, defend to us with Ambrose’s arguments, how we know that the Son is not created.

2.3 A child is born, a son is given

> **Read in a small group:** Chapter 8:54-57 (pages 20-21 in the book)

> **Let someone from the group**, as if he/she is Ambrose, defend to us with Ambrose’s arguments, how it is clear that the Son is eternal.

2.4 Begotten, not made

> **Read in a small group:** Chapter 10:62-11:73 (pages 23-27 in the book)

> **Let someone from the group**, as if he/she is Ambrose, defend to us with Ambrose’s arguments, how it is clear that the Son is begotten, not made, and why ‘begotten’ does not mean ‘later in time than the Father’.

2.5 Five arguments against the idea that the Son of God was ever created

> **Read together:** Chapter 14:86-94 (pages 31-34 in the book)

> **Discuss** how Ambrose shows that the Son of God is uncreated and eternal.

2.6 Some Arian 'prooftexts'

> **Read together:** Chapter 15:95-9 (pages 34-35 in the book)

> **Discuss** how Arius and Ambrose uses bible verses

2.7 Arius condemned by Nicea and his miserable end

> **Read together:** Chapter 18:118-19:131 (pages 40-43 in the book)

> Does Ambrose come with new arguments against Arius?