

## 22. AMBROSE, THE FEARLESS BISHOP OF MILAN.

In the north of Italy lies the beautiful city of Milan.

One day, in 374, the doors of the cathedral in Milan are wide open. In our thoughts, we also enter. But when we go inside, we get quite a shock!

Just look! The whole church is full of people, adults and children. But the solemn, quiet sense of peace which ought to be in the house of the Lord is *not* there. On the contrary, There is lots of shouting going on!

The uproar is disgraceful!

They call each other names and fling angry, venomous glances at each other. Some are clenching their fists threateningly. If this continues, they will soon be fighting!

The quarrel becomes fiercer.

They shout louder to be heard above all the noise.

Soon they will fly at each other!

What does it all mean?

Why are all those people quarrelling?

Why all the shouting and yelling?

### CONFLICT IN MILAN

The Arian conflict has now reached Italy. There, too, we find supporters and opponents of Arius, that heretic from Alexandria. In Italy, too, there is strife about the divinity of the Lord Jesus. This false doctrine caused so much division in the church at that time! Regrettably, it also divided the church of Milan. Half followed Arius, and the other half agreed with Athanasius. It was so bad in Milan that they already had an Arian bishop. But this bishop died in 374, and another bishop or preacher had to be appointed. That wasn't easy.

They ask the emperor who must become the next bishop, but he answers that the church in Milan must choose a bishop themselves. This answer from the emperor was correct because the church itself should appoint its church leaders since the government may not exert any influence on church matters.

But the emperor's reply caused the conflict to escalate! Naturally, the Arians want an Arian bishop again, but the followers of Athanasius say: "No, we must get a bishop who preaches the pure word of God. We want a bishop who agrees with Athanasius!"

Neither party was willing to yield an inch. That's why the reverence in the church is so rudely disturbed. That's why the church in Milan is full of quarrelling people. It looks like they will soon come to blows. Perhaps they will hit and punch each other. There may even be some dead and wounded if some of those hotheads have it their way! Will God's house become a place of murder and bloodshed?

Will the church at Milan be held up to ridicule by God's enemies?

No, thankfully not!

Suddenly, a soldier dressed in shining armour enters the church. A detachment of soldiers follows him. When those excited church members of Milan see that soldier, the wild noise immediately settles down.

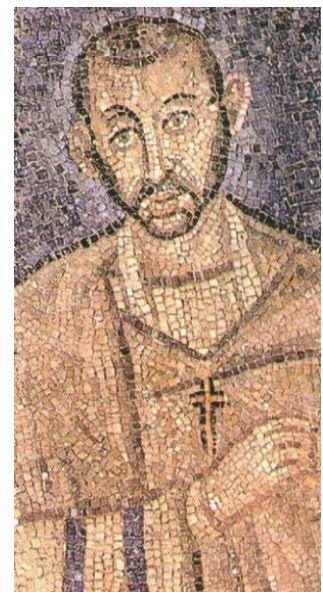
Who is that soldier?

And what is he doing here?

### GOVERNOR AMBROSE

The inhabitants of Milan know him very well. They cry out: "The governor! The governor! Be quiet!" Yes, it's true. That young soldier is the governor of Milan. His name is *Ambrose*. For five years, he has been governor of the province of which Milan is the capital city. He governs on behalf of the emperor.

He has done this so well that everyone



*Ambrose 339-397. Mosaic in Ambrogio church Milan. Orthodoxwiki*

loves that young governor. Everyone greets him with respect and reverence.

He is still young, only 34. He was born in the year 340 in the German city of Trier. His father was governor, not of Milan, but Gaul, a province in the north. So he came from a prominent family. Sadly, while Ambrose was still young, his father died. But Ambrose had the great privilege of having received a God-fearing mother. After the death of her husband, she moved to Rome, and there she sent Ambrose to school. He was a good student because God had given him a good brain. He became a famous lawyer. Besides, Ambrose had an endearing character. He was straightforward and modest and an excellent public speaker.

Consequently, at 29, he had already become governor of Milan. The emperor could make good use of such a man.

Besides making him study, his mother also often spoke to him about the way of salvation. Ambrose was not an indifferent boy. On the contrary, he listened carefully to his mother, and the Lord blessed those conversations so that he learned to love God at an early age.

However, he was not a church member in Milan; he had not confessed his faith yet. He was not even baptised. I cannot tell you why not because there is no record of it.

But now Ambrose heard that the church at Milan was in an uproar. He heard they were quarrelling *in* the church, which could lead to a real fight. So Ambrose hastens to the church with a detachment of soldiers. As the quarrel reaches its climax, he enters the church building. Ambrose



silently watches for a while with anger and sorrow in his heart. Then, stepping forward, he calmly and earnestly addresses the crowd. The

governor rebukes them for their wicked and disorderly conduct. He openly admonishes them to stop it. In gentle reproach, he asks them:

"Do you really have to behave like this? Do you believe that the Lord will bless such conduct? You should all be ashamed of yourselves!"

Ambrose continues to speak along those lines for a while. His words make a deep impression because he touches their consciences. When he is finally silent, it becomes breathlessly quiet. Many are red with shame. Suddenly, a child's high, clear voice calls out:

"Ambrose must become bishop!"

For a moment, all is quiet, but then the idea suddenly gains momentum, and everybody starts shouting:

"Ambrose is bishop! Ambrose is bishop!"

The Arians and the followers of Athanasius *all* shout:

"Ambrose is bishop!"

The governor is embarrassed.

He had not expected that!

It takes him completely by surprise!

"No, no!" he cries out, trying to ward them off and shaking his head.

"No, I can't do that! I'm not even a member, not even baptised. Honestly, people, that's impossible! You must not say that."

But the people do not listen to any of his objections. Their chanting cry becomes louder and more urgent:

"Ambrose is bishop! Ambrose is bishop!"

Whatever Ambrose does to try to get out of it, whatever he says to change the people's minds, it doesn't help. The people will not let him get away with it.

At his wits' end, Ambrose requests a few days to think about it, but in the end, Ambrose finally consents. He confesses his faith during the next service and gets baptised, and eight days later, they ordain him as bishop of Milan.

What a change in his life! God, Who governs and directs all things and holds all things in His hand, ordained that Ambrose would be bishop. Who could ever have thought that? That's how Milan received a new bishop, and they received a good

one! He was allowed to serve the church in Milan for twenty-five years and faithfully performed his duty to the church all that time.

In the first weeks, there was lots of tension. Which side would Ambrose choose? The Arians hoped that he would be Arian. But they were mistaken. Ambrose firmly chose the side of Athanasius. During his entire life, he fought for the purity of the doctrine.

### BISHOP AMBROSE STANDS FIRM

The Arians were sadly disappointed. They took a dislike to Ambrose. They refused to go to the same church as Ambrose; instead, they met outside the city in an old church building. While the weather was nice, it was no problem to walk that distance, but it became more difficult when the rain poured down, and storms howled over the city. They became dissatisfied and demanded a church building in Milan.

They believed Ambrose had taken all the churches in the city away from them. Do you know what they did?



Ambrose. Painting by Bartolomeo Vivarini

No-one heals himself by wounding another.

Ambrose

The emperor's mother, Empress Justina, was Arian. So, the Arians went to her and asked: "Can't you organise a church building for us in Milan? Ambrose will not dare to refuse you!"

Justina promised to do that. She would make sure it would happen.

Soon after, Ambrose receives a letter from Empress Justina. She demands that Ambrose give the Arians one of Milan's church buildings.

What is Ambrose's response? Is he frightened because the empress commands this of him? Does he give in to the demands of the Arians? Oh no! He decisively shakes his head and refuses. He writes a letter to Justina.

"Do you want my gold and my silver? You may have it! Do you want my house and furniture? You may take it all! But the church properties are not mine to give. I *cannot* give away the church properties."

That is his answer to the mighty empress. Justina becomes angry.

She writes him a threatening letter.

He *must* listen to her! She *orders* him to obey! And?

Ambrose refuses again!

He does not allow her to frighten him!

Her threats do not scare him.

So, the empress sends a detachment of soldiers to take the church by force. The soldiers have already forced their way into the church, but now Ambrose is supported by the congregation. They choose the side of their beloved bishop. A revolt threatens, which ends with a victory for Ambrose.

The Arians do *not* get a church building. Ambrose has triumphed brilliantly, and Justina does not dare to keep trying. Ambrose stood immovable because it concerned the honour of God. Ambrose was not *allowed* to give in.

### AMBROSE FACES DOWN EMPEROR THEODOSIUS

A revolt has broken out in Thessalonica. This city is in Macedonia, near the Aegean Sea.





*Emperor Theodosius.  
401-450. Wikipedia*

During his second missionary journey, Paul established a congregation in this city and wrote two letters to the church there.

In the year 390, a dangerous revolt broke out in Thessalonica. Furious residents killed several imperial officers

and dragged their corpses through the streets. That was a terrible insult to the mighty Theodosius, the emperor at the time.

Theodosius had repulsed the intruding pagan tribes along the border. He had gained one victory after another. In the church conflict, he agreed with Athanasius. The Arians received no support from him. Theodosius regularly attended the church where Ambrose preached.

Yet Theodosius had one major flaw. At times he could become uncontrollably angry. During those fits of temper, he didn't realise what he was doing.

When news of the revolt in Thessalonica reaches him, he becomes pale with rage.

"They'll be sorry for that!" he hisses, and he decides to take bloody revenge for that horrible insult. He will make an example of that rebellious city! He'll make them feel they can't do as they please!

But Ambrose also hears that there has been a revolt in Thessalonica. The bishop knows about the emperor's temper; therefore, he immediately dashes off to the imperial palace and urgently requests the emperor not to punish the innocent. Theodosius solemnly promises Ambrose that he will only punish the guilty. He promises that he will first investigate the matter.

This promise reassures Ambrose, who travels home, fully trusting that the emperor will keep his word.



*Massacre in Macedonia. In three hours, the imperial soldiers brutally murder 7000 inhabitants of that wretched city.  
Wikipedia*

However, this time, he is mistaken. The emperor shamefully breaks his promise. In a blind, ruthless rage, he permits his soldiers to indiscriminately murder anyone in Thessalonica. In three hours, the imperial soldiers brutally murder 7000 inhabitants of that wretched city.

Carelessly, they litter the streets with the bodies of the victims. Nobody bothers to investigate who is or isn't guilty, but they savagely strike down everyone they meet. Terrible!

Soon, Ambrose hears what has happened in Thessalonica. He realises that the emperor has shamefully broken his promise.

Anger fills his noble soul. He is indignant and sad. He is indignant about the emperor who has failed to master his temper. He is sad because of so much innocent spilled blood and because his emperor has sinned so grievously.

Sometime later, Theodosius returns to Milan from his murderous, retaliatory march. Surrounded by a train of courtiers, he heads for the church, wanting to partake of the Lord's Supper. There he comes! He is already ascending the steps of the church building when Ambrose goes to meet him.

"Stand back!" says the faithful preacher to the mighty emperor.

"Stand back! Do you want to partake of the Lord's Supper with hands that drip with blood? That will *not* happen!"

Brave Ambrose! How does he dare! That may cost him his life! Yet Ambrose does not hesitate. Standing straight and tall, he blocks the entrance with a stern expression covering his usually friendly face. The emperor is shocked when he hears those words of rebuke. He blushes and lowers his eyes before Ambrose's glare. Softly he says:

"David also sinned grievously, and David found forgiveness of his sins."

Ambrose answers:

"That is true, but David first showed repentance from his terrible sins. You, too, must show that you are sorry for your wicked actions."

Knowing he can go no further, the emperor returns home. He may not enter the church.

Ambrose's enemies, some courtiers, try to incite the emperor against the brave, faithful bishop. He should banish Ambrose or severely punish that insolent bishop!

But happily, the emperor does not listen to that wicked advice. He is ashamed of the bloody massacre he caused in Thessalonica. According to some writers, he did not attend church for months.

But finally, Theodosius can no longer stand it. Again, he travels to the house of the Lord. But again, Ambrose stops him at the entrance. He asks him:

"What do you want? Do you still want to force your way in?" Theodosius answers timidly:

"I can't live like this anymore. What do you want me to do?"

The undaunted bishop answers:

"You have sinned publicly; therefore, you must also confess your sin publicly."

And the emperor agrees! Together with Ambrose, he enters God's house. The emperor may not sit



*Ambrose prevents emperor Theodosius from entering the church. artrusia.ru*

in his usual place but must sit at the front of the church, and there the powerful emperor makes a public confession of sin in the hearing of the whole congregation!

That was Ambrose! When something touched God's honour, he would not back down for anyone!

He ministered in Milan for twenty-five years.

I could tell you much more about Ambrose, but this chapter would become too long. Just a few things.

During the day, he was busy in his congregation. At night, he studied. He was wealthy and distributed many of his possessions among the poor. He regularly visited the sick and the widows. Nobody ever asked him for help or advice in vain. He was always ready to support those in need.

The Romans were almost constantly at war, taking many prisoners during those campaigns. Ambrose had great compassion for those poor, miserable prisoners who became slaves far from their beloved country. He often visited the slave markets and ransomed some enslaved people.

He also did much to improve singing in the church. He even composed some hymns which the congregation could sing in church. In spring 397, he passed away peacefully and entered eternal glory at the age of 57.

They buried his body in the church where he preached so often. According to some writers, his funeral was on the night of Easter.

Of him, it may indeed be said:  
"The memory of the just is blessed."

## QUESTIONS

1. What was the dilemma in Milan?
2. Identify Ambrose. What did he do about the conflict in the church?
3. How did the people react?
4. What two objections did Ambrose raise?
5. What decision did he make?
6. Why did he steadfastly refuse to obey the empress?
7. Explain how Theodosius sinned in the Thessalonian conflict.
8. Why did Ambrose refuse to allow the emperor to partake of the Lord's Supper?
9. Why must Theodosius make a public confession of his sin?
10. List five ways Ambrose's life testified to the grace bestowed upon him.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Theodosius' crime was a serious transgression of moral law. Was it also a violation of Roman law? Read a history text on Roman history or an encyclopedia account of Roman law to find your answer.
2. Read Psalms 32 and 51, where David gives evidence of true repentance. List the verses which show David's godly sorrow for sin.
3. What is the difference between worldly and godly sorrow?
4. Is public confession necessary for all sins? Why or why not?

Hymn written by Ambrose  
(Can be sung to the tune of ps 134)

1. Almighty God we praise, and own,  
Thee our Creator, King alone;  
All things were made to honour Thee  
O Father of eternity.
2. To Thee all angels loudly cry,  
The heav'ns and all the pow'rs on high,  
Cherubs and seraphim's proclaim,  
And cry, thrice holy to Thy name.
3. Lord God of hosts Thy presence bright  
Fills heav'n and earth with beauteous light;  
Th' apostles happy company,  
And ancient prophets all praise Thee.
4. The crow-ned martyrs noble host,  
The holy church in every coast,  
Their Maker for their Father own,  
Now reconcil'd in Christ His Son.