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**CONSTANTINE IN ST. AMBROSE OF MILAN'S DE OBITU
THEODOSII: RESHAPING AND REDEFINING THE EMPEROR'S
ROLE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ARIAN CRISIS**

Abstract: *On Sunday, February 25th, 395, the ceremony that took place in one of Milan christian basilicae was not an usual one. Forty days after the death of Emperor Theodosius, the nobleman Aurelius Ambrosius, bishop of Mediolanum, accomplished the duty not only to celebrate the service, but also to praise the accession to Heaven happening to the dead Sovereign. By doing that, Ambrose played a role of the utmost importance for the self-understanding and the self-representing of the Imperial Court, carrying on a very difficult task. Despite the challenge, Ambrose did not only perform successfully the due (and expected) tribute to Theodosius, but was able to convert the traditional vision of the emperor – deeply marked by a centuries-long pagan imaginery – into a christian one, that in spite of the large number of non-christian people among his audience, nevertheless could be understandable to pagan ears, and in the same time proved evidently that even the most sacred rites of the Roman empire had to face the building of a Christian Weltanschauung.*

What happened in that occasion can be learned not only from the accounts of contemporary church historians (who are usually quite essential in their writings, whose value lies mostly in the information they give us about the presence of Theodosius' relatives and close friends at the funeral rites), but also from the sermon preached by St. Ambrose during the service for the Emperor, whose text is enclosed in his works under the title De obitu Theodosii.

Key words: *Constantine, Ambrose (Saint), Imperial (political) power, political thoughts, Arian heresy, fight for the basilicas, Imperial role, Thessaloniki (massacre of), Theodosius*

Introduction

Among the many contributions that establish Saint Ambrose as a prominent figure among the Fathers of the IV century is without doubt his doctrine on the relationship between the Church and Empire, one which was, before it ever became an abstract concept, the fruit of a series of actual, and at times even dramatic, events.

This is precisely the theme I would like to analyse, by examining the manner in which Saint Ambrose outlines and redefines the imperial image in the sermon he gave forty days after the death of Theodosius the Great.

The development of Ambrose's thought

He became bishop in 374¹ when the Arian controversy was in its final stages, succeeding an Homoean bishop who had been placed there by the emperor Constantius and who

¹ For all questions concerning Ambrose's chronology and biography cf. Visonà 2004.

had reigned for a period of twenty years. Ambrose, who was still at the time a catechumen, was baptised prior to his episcopal consecration only after overcoming much personal resistance, which reflected the labour pains of the soul of the young *consularis Liguria et Aemiliae*, who was called unexpectedly to undergo a total upheaval of his life plans.

Despite these precipitous and unexpected circumstances Ambrose – whose family had been Christian for some time, indeed one of their ancestors, Sotère, had been martyred, having been killed during the persecutions under Diocletian – immediately demonstrated that he was anything but ill-prepared for the position the Church found itself in at that time. In fact, as a condition of his acceptance of the nomination, he requested to be baptised by a bishop of the Nicene faith – when many of his electors had chosen him on the presumption that he was neutral and, perhaps, lacked preparation in aspects of doctrine – thereby giving, by his baptism, the first clear sign of his intention to bear witness to the truth to everyone, by affirming the continuity between the Christian tradition with which he was already familiar and his belonging to the professed faith of the Roman Church, proclaimed by the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea.

Ambrose found himself living in a Church – the post Constantinian one – which, as a result of the tragic experience of the crisis caused by the Arian heresy, had to profoundly rethink the reasons for and conditions in which it should bear witness to the truth. Indeed, after the death of Constantine and his son Constantius' accession to power, the Church found itself once again subject to persecution by the imperial power. While in many ways the persecutions were similar to those which had occurred prior to 313, in other respects paradoxically it was much worse: indeed, the persecutor this time was a baptised Christian emperor in whom the faithful ought to have found protection.

The fact that it was necessary to profess and bear witness to the truth in opposition to the Christian emperor – thereby risking exile, the confiscation of goods and life itself – signified that faithfulness to Christ and to the Church meant the complete destruction of the ideal expounded by Eusebius of Caesarea, who in his “symphony” between civil and religious belonging had praised the perfection of the evangelical ideal achieved by Constantine, and together established the need to completely reformulate the understanding of politics on the part of the faithful.

The Eusebian positions had already been subject to revision prior to Ambrose's time due to the – often dramatic – circumstances in which bishops such as Ossius of Córdoba, Hilary of Poitiers, Lucifer of Cagliari lived, the authors of the first texts in which one notes a critical position in respect of the Emperor and his power. Nevertheless these texts – even though they are the fruit of personal testimonials of great value and testify to quasi-martyrdom experiences – appeared in the main only occasionally, and contained positions and judgements which still needed to be developed and organised.

On becoming bishop, Ambrose finds himself in a complex and almost paradoxical situation in which the very notions themselves of bearing witness to the truth and martyrdom were less precise and unanimously shared than they would have been in the pre-Constantine period, given that the political power did not hesitate to use violence and also more subtle means of corruption and persuasion, as was evidenced in the *Liber contra Constantium*, written ca. 360 by St. Hilary of Poitiers²

2 Cf. Hilar., *Liber contra Constantium* 1-27 (*passim*): «Today we fight an insidious persecutor, an enemy that flatters, he is the antichrist Constantius. He doesn't injure the back, but caresses the belly; he doesn't confiscate goods to give us life, but enriches us to give us death; he doesn't push us towards freedom by imprisoning us, but towards slavery by paying homage to us in his palace; he doesn't aim for our sides, but takes possession of our heart; he doesn't cut off the head with the sword, but kills the soul with gold; he

The situation was, then, extremely complex, and the position of Constantius on which St. Hilary pronounced such a severe judgement was not solely due to his sympathy for the Arian heresy and hostility towards the followers of the Council of Nicaea, but also because he had adapted a typical feature of the pagan Roman imperial ideology that had not yet been replaced by an adhesion to the principles of the Christian faith, and according to which the emperor – *pontifex maximus* – had the power and was entitled to intervene in religious matters.

Ambrose, therefore, would certainly have had to deal with this mentality which was still very much alive. Furthermore, the fact that he was bishop of Milan, one of the capital towns of the Empire, meant that he would have had very frequent contact with the court and the emperors, both in relation to the affairs of his very vast diocese, and – as bishop of the city with an imperial residence – he would have had the responsibility of representing and advocating the interests of the Church (and the various local Churches) in all cases submitted to the examination of the imperial tribunal.

In a context that was brimming over with questions and difficulties, the figure of Ambrose was both singular and providential. Indeed, just as for matters of an ecclesiastical nature, the fact that he came from a Christian family ensured that Ambrose – even though only catechumen – was not lacking the necessary criteria of judgement and conduct. Indeed by his very deeds he immediately demonstrated his clear Nicene position, and also in relation to political matters the new bishop could rely on three personal characteristics that constituted for him three extremely “solid” points on which he could base himself, and which would instil in him a profound knowledge of the subject matter:

- firstly, the fact he was from a noble family of senators ensured that he had acquired an understanding of the concept of “public good” that was rooted in the Roman republican tradition, one that was different from and not infrequently in contrast to the imperial authoritarianism promulgated by the court;

- furthermore, his experience as a lawyer when he was younger and his studies in the law guaranteed he had a secure knowledge of the vast patrimony of laws then in force across the Empire;

- finally, his oath of allegiance to the emperor at the outset of his career as a public servant testified to his position of profound loyalty to the state, a far departure from the other groups then present at the margins of Christian communities.

This unique mix of circumstances and competencies will not be lost: on the contrary, it will constitute for Ambrose a patrimony of inestimable value which will be employed and further enriched by his decision to accept the gifts of faith and episcopal ministry.

The relationship between Ambrose and the imperial power

As previously mentioned, at the time of Ambrose the problem of the relationship between the Church and the imperial power was still wholly open and dramatic. Both

doesn't officially threaten with the stake, but secretly ignites the fire of Gehenna. He doesn't fight to be defeated; but flatters, to dominate [...] I tell you, Constantius, that which I would have said to Nero, that which Decius and Maximian would have heard me say: you fight against God, you rage against the Church, you persecute the saints, you hate those who profess Christ, you destroy religion, you are no longer a tyrant against human things but against the divine [...] You falsely claim to be Christian when you are a new enemy of Christ [...] You compose symbols of faith, and live in opposition to the faith. You are a master of profane sciences, and ignorant of religious truths. You grant bishoprics to your friends, replacing good with evil. You put priests in prison, you use your armies to terrorise the Church, you bring together councils to push the faith of the Westerners towards impiety; you close the bishops in a city to terrorise them with threats, to weaken them by hunger, to wear them down with the cold of winter and lead them astray by deception.

institutions claimed to hold an absolute position on the conception of the world and man. The matter was further complicated by the imperial figure, traditionally identified as having transcendental attributes, who could not therefore – at an ideological level – grant the Church the exclusive role of managing the relationship with the supernatural, given that the peace and prosperity of the empire derived from the *pax deorum et hominum*, i.e. from the fact that the gods were “in peace” with mankind. That could only happen if the cult (made of offerings, sacrifices and prayers) was performed in the correct manner. Therefore, it was a very important duty of the state to establish which cults and religions were lawful and which were not, a duty which culminated in the role of the emperor in his capacity of “*pontifex maximus*”, supreme “regulator” of the affairs between mankind and the gods.

If the “classical” and pagan Roman vision – which had found its culmination with Diocletian – tended to make the emperor himself into a divinity connected to the habitants of Olympus, even the “charismatic view of the late Roman Empire” (developed at the end of the III century) defined the relationship of the sovereign in relation to the divine sphere seeing in him a particular and unique representative of the divine will for the *respublica*. This role of the emperor was guaranteed and affirmed by the victorious outcome of the military adventures, and by the temporal duration of his reign: both of which were viewed as gifts and signs of predilection which he received from the deity³.

By the time of Constantine this view had evolved in part, but the emperor maintained *ex officio* a unique position in relation to God, expressed from time to time by his identification with the disciples, Moses or with the dignity of an “external bishop”. Such uniqueness went hand in hand with the affirmation of the right of the sovereign to intervene in ecclesiastical matters, since his main duty was that of ensuring the divine protection of the empire by means of the scrupulous attention to the proper exercise of worship in the forms desired by God, and for which an essential condition was the unity of the Church.

Yet this desire to maintain the unity of the Church as a part of and as an instrument for the socio-political unity of the Empire had already shown itself to be a very dangerous principle in the hands of the emperors, even if they were Christian: Constantine – in the complex Arian controversy – had sought to establish a doctrinal consonance on the basis on the majority principle. Also his son Constantius, following in his father’s footsteps, had no scruples about intervening heavily on matters of faith, imposing doctrinal formulas which had as their sole “political” objective that of favouring an external consensus (while at a doctrinal level remaining dangerously ambiguous) and at the same time threatening those who did not accept the emperor's position with the confiscation of goods, exile, and even going so far as make defamatory and false allegations against bishops, whose only fault was that they did not accept that the emperor could dictate the contents of the faith.

Moreover, as a result of its authoritarian conception of itself, the imperial power could rely on the permanence – at a legal level – of absolute sovereignty over the people and things, which resulted in an identification of itself – at least in the conception of the court – with the proclaimed right of the prince to freely organise the Church.

The question of the basilicas

Ambrose opposed this very principle during the so-called “fight for the basilicas”, in the years 385-386. We will only look at the essential elements of this symbolic episode, given that the reconstruction of the facts, times and places are still the subject of competing theories.

3 Cf. Heim 1991, 189-190.

In December 375, on the death of Valentinian I, his wife Justina was free – as empress mother of Valentinian II, who was still a child – to manifest her religious ideas in favour of the Arians. In opposition to Ambrose, who had already begun to act in an anti-Arian manner, in 378, together with the court, she transferred to Milan, and following the arrival of homoean refugees from Illiricum (after the defeat of Adrianople), requested and obtained a basilica for them from Gratian. Thanks to the growing friendship between Ambrose and Gratian however the basilica was returned to Catholics in 381. Due to a desire to avoid hasty and precariously forced solutions, Ambrose displayed great patience and undoubted prudence in this situation, instead focusing his attention on a more “long-term” education, in a Nicene sense, of the people and clergy.

In 385 the court (where Justina felt she had greater support, following the death of Graziano in 383 in Paris at the hand of the usurper Arbogast) she once again submitted a request for a basilica to provide a place of worship for the Arian community, more recently led by bishop Mercurinus Auxentius, who had been deposed by Theodosius (384) and had come to Milan from Romania, where he had been a disciple of Ulfila, the Apostle of the Goths. Ambrose was called to the imperial consistory to be informed of the requisition which was already planned, but on hearing the news the people of the Nicene faith gathered *en masse* in front of the imperial palace, threatening disorder. The court, being afraid, asked Ambrose to placate the crowd and the bishop re-established order, thus ensuring that no Catholic basilica would be given to the Arians. Nevertheless, this fact, served only to exacerbate Justina’s bitterness towards Ambrose, which was a prelude to further new developments.

In January 386 Valentinian II passed a law granting freedom of worship and assembly to those who professed the homoean Creed of Rimini (359): thereby paving the way for a new request of the court, indeed in February a request was made to obtain the Porziana Basilica. When Ambrose refused the request, tensions increased. On 29 March 386, Palm Sunday, while Ambrose was celebrating the *traditio symboli* for the catechumens, he heard news that the imperial officials were preparing the Porziana Basilica for Arian worship in the presence of the Emperor. Realising there was risk of a *manu militari* occupation of the basilicas, the people filled up all three of them and remained there in prayer day and night from Tuesday to Holy Thursday, when the court finally renounced its claims. On this occasion Ambrose gave an extremely important sermon and wrote a detailed account of the events to his sister Marcellina. We shall look at some passages from it⁴.

«[5.] If they were to ask me to give something of my own, a fund or a house or gold or silver, I am ready and willing to give that which belongs to me, but I cannot take anything from the temple of God nor handover that which has been entrusted to me to safeguard, to be given to others [...]

[18.] That I should ever handover the inheritance of my forefathers: that is the inheritance of Dionysius, who died in exile for his faith, the inheritance of Eustorgius, the inheritance of Mirocle and all of the earlier holy bishops. Mine was the response of a bishop; let the Emperor do that which is in the power of an emperor. He could take my life sooner than he could take my faith from me.

[35.] That which is due to Caesar shall not be refused him; the church is God’s, and certainly must not be handed over to Caesar, because the temple is God’s and cannot fall within the rights of Caesar.

4 The English translation of the passages taken from St. Ambrose’s works is done having as a base the latin text as it can be found in the edition: *Sancti Ambrosii episcopi Mediolanensis Opera*, Biblioteca Ambrosiana - Città Nuova, Milano-Roma 1977-...

[36.] No one can say that that has been said without honour for the sovereign. What greater honour can be bestowed than to affirm that the Emperor is a son of the Church? When this is said, it is said innocently, with blessings. In fact, the Emperor is within the Church, not above the Church: a good emperor asks help of the Church, and does not reject it. While these words are said with humility they are at the same time said with firmness⁵».

«At the end it was ordered: "Hand over the basilica". I replied: "It is not lawful for me to hand it over to you, neither, Emperor, is it useful for you to receive it. According to the law, you cannot violate the privacy of a private dwelling place, and yet you think you can take God's house as your own?". The Court officers say that everything is lawful for the emperor, that he is, without exception, the master of all things. I replied: "Do not take the responsibility upon yourself, Emperor, to believe that you have some claim over those things which belong to God. Do not be filled with pride, but rather, if you wish to reign for longer, be subject to God [...] The Emperor is entitled to the palaces/buildings, the bishop to the churches. You have been entrusted with the right over public office, but not over the sacred one"⁶».

Ambrose contrasts the authoritarian and absolutist image of the imperial court with the idea of the emperor as a 'simple' man, notwithstanding the responsibilities he holds to govern and hold power. Ambrose gets this idea from his own faith, and while he nevertheless finds it reasonable the idea is sustained by the training he had in his youth, the fact that he had a deep knowledge of Roman law and came from a family of a long line of senators meant he was able to use such knowledge to redefine the imperial role. In fact, Ambrose does not ask for any privileges: he only seeks to claim a right founded on the fact that the State does not precede nor establish religion, but - on the contrary - it is called upon to recognise the existence of God and the religious sense in man and to defend the right to practice same, without however being able to claim to dictate the rules of same.

Furthermore, since Ambrose declared that a baptised Emperor is a son of the Church, and is not above the Church, he places the question - while respecting the various institutional authorities - at the level of a human relationship, that is he invites the Emperor to look at himself from the objective perspective as a man and as a faithful Christian, who is called to salvation.

Ambrose's judgement on Theodosius, Constantine and imperial power

Ambrose best set out his detailed thoughts on the relationship between the Church and the Empire in the years 388-395 during which time his complex relationship with emperor Theodosius commenced and developed. It was not always an easy relationship, but it gave way to a sincere friendship between two men of exceptional stature.

In October 388 - after the defeat of the usurper Maximus and Theodosius' victorious entry into Milan - the episode reported by the historian Sozomene⁷ should perhaps be mentioned here: Theodosius, following the Constantinopolitan custom according to which the Emperor was entitled to stay in the presbytery, wanted to go up onto the altar but Ambrose corrected him by refusing to commence the ceremony until he had taken his seat in the front pews of the assembly.

At the end of 388 the complicated matter of the Callinico synagogue (in northern Mesopotamia) came to a head and exploded: at the instigation of a bishop and, perhaps, in response to certain provocations, the local Christians burnt down the synagogue.

5 Ambr., *Contra Auxentium de basilicis tradendis* 5.18.35.36 *passim*, written in 386.

6 Ambr.ep. 76 *De traditione basilicae* 19, *passim*.

7 Cf. Soz.h.e. 7.25,8-9.

Theodosius, after having condemned the bishop who had been responsible to rebuild the building that had been destroyed, was obliged by Ambrose to withdraw his order and to have the State Treasury pay to repair the damage. In this episode (cf. Ambr.ep. 74), the traditional opinion of western academics sees this as an embarrassing exaggeration on Ambrose's part, especially when he appears to defend the right, on the part of the Christians, to destroy the places of worship of other religions, considered to be false or superseded. That said, recently, academic Hervé Savon⁸ has shown that, in writing about this episode, Ambrose is fulfilling his role as "defence advocate" for the local Church of Callinico in the imperial tribunal. Hence, in the words of the bishop, one cannot find a sort of "theory" that justifies the abuse displayed by the Christians towards the pagans, but simply the speech of a defence advocate who will not spare us anything of the art of oratory to absolve the interested party.

In 390, the period running from the summer through to the end of the year was marked by the massacre of Thessaloniki and the subsequent penitence on the part of Theodosius. In the wake of the riots that broke out after the arrest of a famous jockey for paedophilia, the head of the police was killed, a force made up of Goths in the service of the Empire. Perhaps to avert a revolt by the allied Barbarians, Theodosius authorised the Goth soldiers to carry out an indiscriminate retaliation against the entire population, which led to thousands of deaths and provoked horror throughout the Empire. Ambrose, who had been prohibited from meeting Theodosius before he ordered the massacre, was forced to take a stand, by excluding the Emperor from receiving communion and imposing an ecclesiastical penitence before he could be readmitted to the Church. This is perhaps the most delicate and important episode not only for the relationship between these two men, but also for the redefinition – as we shall see – of the imperial figure.

In 393-394, with the arrival of the usurper Eugenius in Italy, Ambrose went to Bologna, Faenza and Florence to avoid meeting him; at the battle of Frigidus (5-6 September) Theodosius defeated Eugenius.

Theodosius died in 395 (on 17 January).

It was on the occasion of a service held 40 days after his death that Ambrose refined his thoughts on the relationship between the Empire and religion in the light of Christianity and the novelty it brought: in this sense the sermon given by him (*De obitu Theodosii*) represents almost a *summa* of Ambrosian political theology, one in which Ambrose's attention to bringing together the best of that which was in the Roman tradition with the new requirements of the Gospels is most remarkable and amazing.

A mandatory question for anyone who comes to study the *De obitu Theodosii* relates to the singular text of the sermon: whether the text which has been handed down to us today corresponds with the speech given by Ambrose on Sunday 25 February 395. The problem relates precisely to the part of the work that speaks about the *inventio crucis* by the Empress Helena: since 1921⁹ many have argued that this part was only added by Ambrose before the publication, with the result that we have a sermon that was significantly different in length from the one actually given during the commemoration service.

The theory that it was written subsequently – it is worthwhile pointing out – is based solely on literary criteria, since the manuscript tradition is absolutely unanimous in maintaining that the sermon has been handed down in the original form. Nevertheless the theory had several supporters, and it was not until 1978 W. Steidle¹⁰ proved – in a manner

8 Savon 2007, 8-9.

9 Cf. Laurand 1921, 349-350.

10 Cf. Steidle 1978, 94-112.

believed by those who followed the debate to be exhaustive – its scarce reliability, adding at the same time a series of results which were of important interest for an understanding of the text. As J.V. Drijvers¹¹ wrote in 1992: «In 1978 W. Steidle proved in a most convincing way, basing his position on coherent motives within the work itself, that the legend was an essential and original part of the whole of *De obitu Theodosii*, and therefore it could not have been added at a later date. The central theme in the sermon is the *hereditas fidei* and, according to Steidle, the story about finding the Cross adapts itself very well to it».

In his speech given in front of the entire imperial court, Ambrose underlines the total ecclesiastical belonging of the Emperor to the Church, praising him because he was *proximus Christo*¹² (close to Christ) even on the battlefield. Compared to the tradition dating back to Augustus, which saw the emperor typically having the virtues of courage in battle (*uirtus*), *clementia*, *iustitia* and the proper management of relations with the gods (*pietas*), Ambrose wholly redefined the imperial figure, which was by now characterised by *humilitas*, *fides* (understood as the faith of the Council of Nicaea) and by *mercy*, a virtue that was exemplified in the person of Christ and which encompassed both *iustitia* and *clementia* equally.

Ambrose's insistence on a return to the fundamental theological virtues such as *misericordia* would therefore appear as a piece that fits coherently in the picture that he is outlining: *fides* not only guarantees the presence of the virtues, but becomes the foundation – since it ensures stability in the relationship with the *dominus uirtutum* – including the *uirtutes*, of which the emperors who preceded Constantine revealed themselves to be wholly lacking. The mercilessly cruel portrait Ambrose describes when speaking about them – to the extent that he compares them to beasts¹³ – while it is not exaggerated, aims to further emphasise the need for faith, which he explains is the only strength capable of guiding a prince in government.

The beneficial aspects of faith for the Emperor and thus the entire Empire as a whole are set out by Ambrose primarily in two directions: a return to a correct exercise of power *potestas* and the possibility, on the part of princes *princeps*, to overcome the more negative aspects of their character. Without faith *potestas* is «prona... in uitium»¹⁴ and becomes an «iniusta praeceptio»¹⁵, exercised by tyrants who do not even realise the seriousness and responsibility of the duties entrusted to them¹⁶, but rather take advantage of the impunities that such entails as an incentive toward vice and illicit freedoms. Christian emperors, instead, accept the imposition of a limit «*deuotionis et fidei*»¹⁷, in interpreting *potestas* to be an «*iusta moderatio*»¹⁸, they are raised to the dignity of men and escape the temptation towards despotism, they learn to accept that they are fallible and to humble themselves in public when asking forgiveness for sins committed by them in the exercise of their power¹⁹.

11 Cf. Drijvers 1992, 109.

12 Ambr., *De obitu Theodosii* 7.

13 [imperatores] ...*quasi equi in libidines adhinnirent, quod liceret illis adulteria inpune committere; prona enim potestas in uitium ferebatur et more pecudum uaga sese libidine polluebant...*: Ambr., *De obitu Theodosii* 50-51 (passim).

14 *De obitu Theodosii*, 51.

15 *De obitu Theodosii*, 48.

16 ...*qui se non agnoscerent reges*: *De obitu Theodosii*, 51.

17 *Ivi*.

18 *De obitu Theodosii*, 48.

19 *Theodosius imperator [...] ubi peccatum obrepsit, ueniam postulauit*: *De obitu Theodosii*, 28. And again: “*Dilexi*” uirum, qui magis arguentem quam adulantem probaret. *Strauit omne, quo utebatur*,

Ambrose confirms that Theodosius is judged by God in this way after his death not on the basis of his successes in politics and on the battlefield, but – in the same way as any other faithful – on the basis of his progress in becoming more Christ-like through the practice of charity. Let us read some passages of *De obitu Theodosii*:

«[7.] You will doubtless recall the triumphs secured for you by Theodosius' faith. When out of fear for those so narrow places [...] the army, on the march, descended a little too slowly onto the battlefield and it seemed like the enemy advanced on horseback taking advantage of that moment of hesitation, the prince leapt down from his horse and, advancing alone towards the deployed army, exclaimed: "Where is the God of Theodosius?". He spoke like this, as one in Christ. Who, indeed, could have pronounced these words, if he did not know that he was united with Christ? That question spurred on everyone as he led them to battle by his example. He was by now undoubtedly advanced in years, but he was always vigorous in his faith. [8.] Theodosius' faith was therefore your victory: that your faith may be the strength of your children.

[12.] And what an emperor! A holy emperor, a merciful emperor, a faithful emperor [...] It is a great thing to find a merciful and faithful man, it is even greater to find such in an emperor, whose power encourages him to punish whereas compassion prevents him from condemning! What is more noble than the probity/integrity of an emperor who is not exalted by power, swollen by pride, but made docile by piety/mercy? What a gift it is then to renounce the terror of power and to demonstrate instead the sweetness of goodness!

[13.] Theodosius – may his remembrance be glorious – maintained he received a grace when he was asked to forgive, and the greater the irritation provoked by anger all the more was he disposed to forgive [...] He wanted to win, not strike, act as a fair judge, and not as one willing to condemn, such as to never refuse to forgive those who confessed their sins; or, if there was some hidden guilt within one's conscience, he referred it to God's justice.

[32.] Free from struggles, Theodosius – may his remembrance be glorious – now enjoys light perpetual and rest without end and shares in the fruits of divine reward for that which he did when on earth. Since Theodosius – may his remembrance be glorious – loved the Lord your God, he has earned the right to share in the company of the saints»²⁰

A re-reading of the theme of power written by Ambrose from a Christian perspective thus takes on a particular importance, commencing with the story of the finding of the True Cross by Constantine and Helena, of which the Milanese bishop is the first authoritative witness also thanks to the detail and accuracy of the facts in his story.

In fact, Ambrose confirms that the true greatness of Constantine lies precisely in his finding of the true Cross, even though he was baptised on his deathbed, he had the merit of being the first emperor to have accepted Christ and his conception of political power. Helena's decision to forge two nails from the Cross into the helm of the crown and the bit of her son Constantine's horse reveal how only a vision of reality, that has as its starting point the life of Christ, can redeem the imperial institution and the figure of the emperor himself²¹.

«[43.] Maria was visited so that she could free Eve, Helena was visited so that emperors could be saved. Therefore, she sent the crown studded with precious stones to her son Constantine, held together by the most precious jewel of the cross of divine redemption, linked to the iron; she also sent him the bit. Constantine used both objects and transmitted the faith to his successors. The principle of Christian emperors *it is something*

insigne regium, defleuit in ecclesia publice peccatum suum [...] Quod priuati erubescunt, non erubuit imperator, publicam agere paenitentiam: De obitu Theodosii, 34.

²⁰ *De obitu Theodosii*, 7-8. 12. 13. 32 (*passim*).

²¹ Cf. Sordi 2008, 151-157. 173-178.

holy that is onto the bit: faith comes from him, so that persecution could stop and devotion take its place.

[48.] Helena acted wisely, placing the cross on the head of kings, so that through kings the cross of Christ could be adored. This is not arrogance but devotion because it pays homage to holy redemption. Such a figure at the head of the Roman empire is very precious indeed, one who governs the whole world and is carried by the princes on their head, so that they who were wont to persecute her begin to spread the faith. Rightly so the figurehead is at the helm, because, wherein resides intelligence therein also will be protection. On the head the crown, in the hands the reins: the crown is made in the form of the cross, so that the faith may shine; even the reins are made in the shape of the cross, so that the authorities govern with just rather than unjust moderation. Even princes obtain, with Christ's generous permission, in the imitation of the Lord, that which was recited about the roman emperor: *You have placed on his head a crown embellished by gems* (Ps 20,4).

[50.] Indeed, power abandons itself without restraint to vice and, like beasts, the sovereigns defile themselves in unbridled lust and ignore God. The Lord's cross stopped them in their tracks and kept them from committing impieties, he made them lift up their eyes so that they could seek Christ in heaven. They put a muzzle on incredulity, they welcomed the bite of devotion and faith, following He who says: *Shoulder my yoke and learn from me. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light* (Mt 11,29-30). *Hence we have had the other Christian princes – with the exception of Julian, who left the Author of his salvation to abandon himself to the fallacy/errors/deceits of philosophy -, hence we have had a Gratian and a Theodosius*²².

The salvation of the Empire and the Emperor, therefore, follows the same path or, better, follows the Cross of Christ. This conception was anything but a spiritualistic reduction or simple exhortation: on the contrary, it was elaborated by Ambrose whose starting point was one's actual experience and from an intelligent and rational consideration of both the regulatory framework that lay the foundations of imperial ideology and the exercise of power, and the characters of many emperors and/or pretenders with whom he himself had often had to deal.

Theodosius, with whom there had been many clashes and moments of friction, represented for Ambrose a true example of a man who allowed himself to be shaped by his faith, even in the exercise of imperial power and it was for this reason that the relationship between the two was for Ambrose also an occasion of true affection and true and real pastoral care. In particular, the episode of penitence following the massacre of Thessaloniki reveals the "benefits" of such a conception: contrary to what subsequent historians have written – especially Socrates and Sozomene – the question was not raised by Ambrose in juxtaposing terms. There was no struggle at the doors of the Church, nor was the bishop seen to physically obstruct Theodosius from entering the basilica. Instead, Ambrose, wrote a letter (of which we quote some passages) of immense humanity and Christian mercy to Theodosius in which he displayed all of the care and paternal concern for the risk that his soul was running and which took precedence over a concern for the political situation.

Listen, then, most respectable (*auguste*) Emperor, to what I have to tell you [...] A fact has occurred in the city of Thessaloniki, the equal of which has never before been seen, that I have not succeeded in preventing [...] When news of this fact first reached me, a Synod had been called in view of the arrival of the bishops from Gaul: there was not a single person who was not aggrieved by it, no one underestimated the seriousness of it, it was inconceivable that, permitting you to partake in communion, Ambrose would absolve

²² *De obitu Theodosii*, 43. 48. 50 (*passim*).

you from this fact: in fact, the guilt would be even more hateful, if no one had declared that it was necessary to be reconciled with our God.

Perhaps you are ashamed, emperor, to do that which David did, king, prophet, father of the descendants of Christ in the flesh? We shouldn't be amazed if a man sins, but it is a thing worthy of reproof if he does not acknowledge that he has erred, if he does not humble himself before God [...]

In writing this to you, it is not my intention to upset your soul, but rather that the examples of kings may induce you to remove this sin from your kingdom; and you remove it by humbling your soul before God. You are a man and you have suffered temptation: overcome it! Sin cannot cancel itself out if not with tears and penitence [...]

I am writing this letter to you personally, so that you will be the only one to read it [...] Do what you believe will be most agreeable at the opportune moment [...] He who accuses himself is correct, when he has sinned; not he who boasts about it. If you believe, listen to my advice; I repeat: if you believe, recognise the truth of what I say; if you do not believe, forgive my conduct, by which I am God's side...»²³

Theodosius understood the meaning of Ambrose's letter, and subjected himself to a form of penitence which probably consisted in presenting himself before the bishop in penitent dress without the royal emblems: something which would have been unheard of at the time, and while it did not represent a humiliation of political power in the face of the Church, at the same time it clearly stated that the emperor renounced any claim to a "preferential path" in his relationship with God, accepting to be subject – as a faithful – to the "ordinary" pastoral care of the Church. Here there is a real "humanisation" of the figure of the emperor, that is "liberated" from a merely institutional identity and can be captured and represented not solely on the basis of the role that he plays: indeed, Ambrose, is not afraid of expressing his affection and friendship for Theodosius, which is sincerely reciprocated.

Such affection, which goes beyond the boundaries of the strictly personal, comes to represent a good also for the *respublica*, as Ambrose himself affirms when he recalls how, on his deathbed, Theodosius confided in him his preoccupations for the Empire and the Church, together with the fact – related by the biographer Paulinus – that Stilicho himself, general and head of the army, cried on the death of Ambrose for the great loss for the Empire²⁴.

[33.] I too [...] loved this merciful man, humble even in the exercise of imperial power, blessed with a pure heart and a meek soul, who the Lord loves [...] [34.] I loved this man who preferred he who corrected him to he who flattered him. He removed every royal insignia/emblem that he usually wore, he cried publicly in church for his sin, that he committed almost unknown to himself, because he had been deceived by others, with lamentations and tears he invoked forgiveness. He, the emperor, was not ashamed of that which private citizens were ashamed of, that is of making a public penitence, and not a day would pass thereafter when he did not regret his error [...] [35.] I loved this man who in the supreme moment with his final breath asked for me. I loved this man who, when he was about to shed his body, was more concerned for the condition of the churches than for his illness. I loved him then, I admit it, and thus I have suffered pain in the depths of my heart...

Conclusion

The thought and conduct of Ambrose played a key role in affirming a vision of the relationship between Church and political power in the West which still raises great interest

23 Ambr.ep. *extra collectionem* 12 (*passim*).

24 Cf. Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 45.

today, and remains a key to understanding western history and part of the origins of the theological-political thinking of the Church.

When he looks to the empire, Ambrose never attempts to make an idol out of it or detach it from its sense of reality at the service of man and God's plan. He never tires from placing the figure of Christ at the centre of the cosmos, He who brings about the renewal-redemption of man. With the essentially social-communional characteristic of human beings, man's redemption comes through the renewal of power and *respublica*, which are called upon to welcome and express a true novelty in the light of the event of the Incarnation.

Thus Ambrose always remains coherent in his affirmation of a reality that is positive because Christ is present in it, even when we consider the political dimension of reality he does not fall into one of the two opposing and frequent positions that either it is a condemnation without any hope of appeal and it is viewed as irremediably evil, or, in the alternative, it is an uncritical adherence to a political system of power that is "blessed" because it declares itself to be subject to the church sphere.

A balanced position such as Ambrose's, built on the dual basis of the relationship with Christ present and active, and the relationship with the political events of the time, which he never presumes to be excluded from redemption. We are still in need of such a Father and master in the faith and of such a balanced position.

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Франческо Браски

**КОНСТАНТИН У ДЕЛУ DE OBITU THEODOSII СВ. АМБРОЗИЈА ИЗ
МИЛАНА: НОВО ОБЛИКОВАЊЕ И ДЕФИНИСАЊЕ УЛОГЕ ЦАРА НАКОН
АРИЈАНСКЕ КРИЗЕ**

У среду, 25. фебруара 325., церемонија која се одиграла у једној од хришћанских базилика у Милану била је другачија од осталих. Четрдесет дана након смрти цара Теодосија, племић Аурелијус Амброзијус, бискуп Медиоланума, извршио је свој задатак, по коме није само славио учинак, већ величао и успење на Небеса управо преминулог владара. Једним таквим чином, Амброзије је урадио нешто што је имало огроман значај за начин на који је царски двор себе доживљавао и себе приказивао другима, а то је био јако тежак задатак. Без обзира на тежину изазова, Амброзије није само успешно одао заслужену (и очекивану) пошту Теодосију, већ је успео и да промени традиционалну слику о цару – дубоко условљену вишевековном паганском иконографијом – у хришћанску, и то тако да су и многобројни нехришћани у његовој публици могли да је разумеју, где је истовремено јасно показао да и најсветији ритуали Римскога царства сада морају да се мењају, услед изградње једног хришћанског погледа на свет.

Шта се десило том приликом можемо да сазнамо не само из описа црквених историчара који су били савременици тога догађаја (а чији су списи обично сасвим кратки, и значајни углавном због тога што нам дају информације о присуству Теодосијевих рођака и блиских пријатеља сахрани), већ и из проповеди коју је Св. Амброзије одржао током службе за цара, а чији је текст доступан у његовим делима под називом *De Obitu Theodosii*.