

Each Advent, we wait in joyful anticipation for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Jesus Christ. At the end of time, those living will be judged. The good will rise to new life in Christ. “Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; They will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee” (Isa 35:10). Those who have rejected God in this life will know what true rejection means in the kingdom to come by eternal separation from God.

Every generation waits in hopeful anticipation for Christ the King to return in glory. The year 374 AD was no different and in fact had a number of similarities with our own divisive times. In the Italian city of Milan, the bishop had died, and two rival factions jockeyed for power.

The late Bishop Auxentius had denied the divinity of Christ. This false teaching had been declared a heresy in 325 at the Council of Nicaea. When we pray the Nicene Creed we assert the divinity of Jesus when we pray “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.” We also assert the humanity of Jesus when we pray: “For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried.”

Nearly 50 years after the definitive teaching of the Council of Nicea and Christianity was still suffering from many diehards who refused to accept the orthodox teaching on the divine and human nature of Jesus. Bishop Auxentius had been notorious for claiming the Council of Nicea was fake news and he forced clergy throughout his diocese to accept the false Arian creeds. With his death in the year 374, many orthodox Christians hoped the next bishop would set things straight.

The process for selecting a new bishop was more localized in the 4<sup>th</sup> century than it is today. Two competing factions forcefully put forward candidates for the next bishop and neither wanted to budge. The crowd that had gathered outside of the Cathedral of Milan seemed to be on the verge of a riot. Ambrose, who was a well-respected civil authority, went to quiet the crowds and stem the chaos. Although his views on the divinity of Christ were unknown, each side knew of his fairness in civil matters and felt they could control a new bishop who at that time had not even been baptized a Christian.

Someone in the crowd cried out, “Ambrose for bishop! Ambrose for bishop!” And the voice of one soon became the voice of many. “A mob of Milanese Catholics virtually forced Ambrose to become their bishop against his own will. Eight days after his baptism, Ambrose received episcopal consecration on December 7, 374. The date would eventually become his liturgical feast.”<sup>i</sup>

To his credit, Ambrose had been diligently studying the faith prior to his election as bishop. The same keen mind that he had applied to master civil law was now applied to learning the faith. With his willingness to learn and to rely on God for guidance, he became one of the finest bishops of his era. “He began his ministry by giving everything he owned to the poor and to the Church.”<sup>ii</sup> He drew on the wisdom of gifted theologians like Saint Basil to explain the Church’s traditional teachings in an era of doctrinal confusion. Ambrose’s harmony of faith with pre-Christian philosophy won many over including a young professor named Augustine. Bishop Ambrose taught and baptized the man history later came to know as Saint Augustine of Hippo.

Some heretics still clung to Arianism and made life difficult for the bishop. Ambrose chose to love his enemies and do his best to teach the faith. “He found time to counsel an

amazing range of public officials, pagan inquirers, confused Catholics and penitent sinners.”<sup>iii</sup> His holy life and superior teaching ability won many over and helped him to keep at bay those who regretted supporting him for bishop.

Ambrose’s wisdom as a bishop and skill as a politician served him well. He effectively dealt with the Western Empress Justina who clung to Arianism. Ambrose also displayed heroic virtue in publicly rebuking the Emperor Theodosius whose order led to the slaughter of 7,000 citizens in Thessalonica. The emperor publicly repented and made penitential amends for his abuse of power. Ambrose’s rebuke spurred a profound change of heart for Emperor Theodosius who was able to reconcile with the Church and the bishop.

Saint Ambrose died in 397 and has been declared a Doctor of the Church. “His 23 years of diligent service had turned a deeply troubled diocese into an exemplary outpost for the faith.”<sup>iv</sup> His writings still instruct us to this very day.

Amidst the troubles and divisiveness of our own time, let us never forget that God is steering the course of history through those he calls to serve. “Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; With divine recompense he comes to save you” (Isa 35:4).

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-ambrose-76

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.