



# AMBROSE OF MILAN

## KEY BISHOP OF THE NICENE ERA

Christian Biographies  
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## EARLY LIFE

- Born in Trier, Germany, 340 A.D.
- Raised in a noble Roman family, son of Aurelius Ambrosius, a praetorian prefect of Gaul.
- His mother was noted for her intellect and piety.
- Trained in the law and rhetoric, Ambrose entered the imperial service.
- “Raised in the midst of politics and the church.”
- The bees and the honey anticipated his future eloquence.

# ELECTED BISHOP OF MILAN

- At age 32, Ambrose became a provincial governor. In 374, was governor of Aemilia-Liguria, which included the imperial capital of Milan. Ambrose therefore was well-known at the emperor's court.
- In 374, the bishop of Milan died, leading to a conflict between Arians and Trinitarians. Ambrose, the governor, arrived at the cathedral and gave a speech calling for peace. The cry, "Ambrose, Bishop!" led to his election.
- Ambrose went into hiding, being unprepared for the office of bishop (and unbaptized). Upon appeal of the emperor Gratian, Ambrose accepted, was baptized, and ordained as bishop.





# AMBROSE'S MINISTRY AS BISHOP

- Study for his new office
  - Having been made bishop, Ambrose took up a crash course in theology. Was already fluent in Greek. Studied the Bible and the works of Origen, Athanasius, and Basil of Caesarea.
  - Began expository preaching of the Old Testament, impressing Augustine, who he converted and baptized.
- Embrace of Asceticism
  - Influenced by the ascetic tradition popular at his time, Ambrose embraced celibacy and practiced scourging.
  - He also sold his extensive lands and possessions, making him popular with the people.
- Concern for the People
  - Showed great concern for the well-being of the people, especially the poor.
  - Was known for calling out corrupt officials during his sermons.
  - His rhetorical skill became greatly admired, making him a popular figure and a powerful churchman.



“There is your brother, naked, crying, and you stand there confused over the choice of an attractive floor covering.”

# CONFLICT WITH THE ARIANS

- The late 4<sup>th</sup> century saw bitter conflict between Arians and Nicene Christians, mainly involving the faith of various emperors.
- Ambrose vigorously refuted Arianism, which was supported by the emperor Valentinian II.
- Battle for the Churches
  - In 385, refused to hand over 2 churches in Milan at the request of the emperor and his mother (both Arians). Summoned before the emperor, he refused to back down.
  - The city Prefect hung the personal standards of the emperor and his mother at one church, setting it aside for Arian worship. Ambrose barricaded himself inside with his congregation, until the imperial order was rescinded.
  - “If you demand my person, I am ready to submit: carry me to prison or death. I will not resist; but I will never betray the church of Christ.”





# AMBROSE AND THE EMPEROR

- Excommunication of Theodosius, 390
  - The Roman governor was killed by a mob over a chariot racer.
  - Theodosius responded by attending the chariot races, sending in his troops, who killed 7,000 people.
  - Learning of this massacre, Ambrose refused Theodosius entry into the church, requiring him to “do like David” and make penance for 8 months until Ambrose received him back.
- Attack on the Synagogue, 388
  - Ambrose led an attack on a prominent Jewish synagogue, destroying it.
  - Theodosius learned of the attack and ordered Ambrose to pay for its reconstruction.
  - Ambrose refused, warning the emperor how unpopular was his support of Jews. Theodosius relented.
- Persecution of the Pagans
  - Under pressure from Ambrose, Theodosius outlaws paganism with severe penalties.
  - Ambrose convinced emperor Gratian to remove the altar to victory from the Senate House in Rome.



# AMBROSE AND MUSIC

- Promoted the use of antiphonal chant (known as Ambrosian Chant)
- Wrote hymns and promoted unison hymn singing in the church.

“A psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people, a hymn in praise of God, the assembly’s homage, a general acclamation, a word that speaks for all the voice of the Church, a confession of faith in song.”
- O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright

“O Splendor of God’s glory bright, from light eternal bringing light.  
O Light of light, light’s living Spring, true Day, all days illumining.  
Come, very Sun of heaven’s love, in lasting radiance from above,  
And pour the Holy Spirit’s ray on all we think or do today.”





## THE LEGACY OF AMBROSE

- Converted and mentored Augustin of Hippo
- Played a key role in defense of the Trinity and the consolidation of Nicaea
- Promoted flexibility in liturgical practice
  - “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”
- Strongly promoted Mary as the “Mother of God,” but opposed her worship
- Consolidated church power in society and the role of the sacraments in civil religion
- Emphasized the role of the church in advocating for the poor in society.
- Set an historic example of Christian courage in the face of tyranny.