

Bishop of Milan

Ever since the heroic Bishop Dionysius, in the year 355, had been dragged in chains to his place of exile in the distant East, the ancient chair of St. Barnabas had been occupied by the intruded Cappadocian, Auxentius, an Arian filled with bitter hatred of the Catholic Faith, ignorant of the Latin language, a wily and violent persecutor of his orthodox subjects. To the great relief of the Catholics, the death of the petty tyrant in 374 ended a bondage which had lasted nearly twenty years. The bishops of the province, dreading the inevitable tumults of a popular election, begged the Emperor Valentinian to appoint a successor by imperial edict; he, however, decided that the election must take place in the usual way. It devolved upon Ambrose, therefore, to maintain order in the city at this perilous juncture. Proceeding to the basilica in which the disunited clergy and people were assembled, he began a conciliatory discourse in the interest of peace and moderation, but was interrupted by a voice (according to Paulinus, the voice of an infant) crying, "Ambrose, Bishop". The cry was instantly repeated by the entire assembly, and Ambrose, to his surprise and dismay, was unanimously pronounced elected. Quite apart from any supernatural intervention, he was the only logical candidate, known to the Catholics as a firm believer in the Nicene Creed, unobnoxious to the Arians, as one who had kept aloof from all theological controversies. The only difficulty was that of forcing the bewildered consular to accept an office for which his previous training nowise fitted him. Strange to say, like so many other believers of that age, from a misguided reverence for the sanctity of baptism, he was still only a catechumen, and by a wise provision of the canons ineligible to the episcopate. That he was sincere in his repugnance to accepting the responsibilities of the sacred office, those only have doubted who have judged a great man by the standard of their own pettiness. Were Ambrose the worldly-minded, ambitious, and scheming individual they choose to paint him, he would have surely sought advancement in the career that lay wide open before him as a man of acknowledged ability and noble blood. It is difficult to believe that he resorted to the questionable expedients mentioned by his biographer as practised by him with a view to undermining his reputation with the populace. At any rate his efforts were unsuccessful. Valentinian, who was proud that his favourable opinion of Ambrose had been so fully ratified by the voice of clergy and people, confirmed the election and pronounced severe penalties against all who should abet him in his attempt to conceal himself. The Saint finally acquiesced, received baptism at the hands of a Catholic bishop, and eight days later, 7 December 374, the day on which East and West annually honour his memory, after the necessary preliminary degrees was consecrated bishop.

He was now in his thirty-fifth year, and was destined to edify the Church for the comparatively long space of twenty-three active years. From the very beginning he proved himself to be that which he has ever since remained in the estimation of the Christian world, the perfect model of a Christian bishop. There is some truth underlying the exaggerated eulogy of the chastened Theodosius, as reported by Theodoret (v, 18), "I know no bishop worthy of the name, except Ambrose". In him the magnanimity of the Roman patrician was tempered by the meekness and charity of the Christian saint. His first act in the episcopate, imitated by many a saintly successor, was to divest himself of his worldly goods. His personal property he gave to the poor; he made over his landed possessions to the Church, making provision for the support of his beloved sister. The self-devotion of his brother, Satyrus, relieved him from the care of the temporalities, and enabled him to attend exclusively to his spiritual duties. In order to supply the lack of an early theological

training, he devoted himself assiduously to the study of Scripture and the Fathers, with a marked preference for Origen and St. Basil, traces of whose influence are repeatedly met with in his works. With a genius truly Roman, he, like Cicero, Virgil, and other classical authors, contented himself with thoroughly digesting and casting into a Latin mould the best fruits of Greek thought. His studies were of an eminently practical nature; he learned that he might teach. In the exordium of his treatise, "De Officiis", he complains that, owing to the suddenness of his transfer from the tribunal to the pulpit, he was compelled to learn and teach simultaneously. His piety, sound judgment, and genuine Catholic instinct preserved him from error, and his fame as an eloquent expounder of Catholic doctrine soon reached the ends of the earth. His power as an orator is attested not only by the repeated eulogies, but yet more by the conversion of the skilled rhetorician Augustine. His style is that of a man who is concerned with thoughts rather than words. We cannot imagine him wasting time in turning an elegant phrase. "He was one of those", says St. Augustine, "who speak the truth, and speak it well, judiciously, pointedly, and with beauty and power of expression" (*Christian Doctrine* IV.21).