

## Early Life

The materials for a biography of the Saint are chiefly to be found scattered through his writings, since the "Life" written after his death by his secretary, Paulinus, at the suggestion of St. Augustine, is extremely disappointing. Ambrose was descended from an ancient Roman family, which, at an early period had embraced Christianity, and numbered among its scions both Christian martyrs and high officials of State. At the time of his birth his father, likewise named Ambrosius, was Prefect of Gallia, and as such ruled the present territories of France, Britain, and Spain, together with Tingitana in Africa. It was one of the four great prefectures of the Empire, and the highest office that could be held by a subject. Trier, Arles, and Lyons, the three principal cities of the province, contend for the honour of having given birth to the Saint. He was the youngest of three children, being preceded by a sister, Marcellina, who became a nun, and a brother Satyrus, who, upon the unexpected appointment of Ambrose to the episcopate, resigned a prefecture in order to live with him and relieve him from temporal cares. About the year 354 Ambrosius, the father, died, whereupon the family removed to Rome. The saintly and accomplished widow was greatly assisted in the religious training of her two sons by the example and admonitions of her daughter, Marcellina, who was about ten years older than Ambrose. Marcellina had already received the virginal veil from the hands of Liberius, the Roman Pontiff, and with another consecrated virgin lived in her mother's house. From her the Saint imbibed that enthusiastic love of virginity which became his distinguishing trait. His progress in secular knowledge kept equal pace with his growth in piety. It was of extreme advantage to himself and to the Church that he acquired a thorough mastery of the Greek language and literature, the lack of which is so painfully apparent in the intellectual equipment of St. Augustine and, in the succeeding age, of the great St. Leo. In all probability the Greek Schism would not have taken place had East and West continued to converse as intimately as did St. Ambrose and St. Basil. Upon the completion of his liberal education, the Saint devoted his attention to the study and practice of the law, and soon so distinguished himself by the eloquence and ability of his pleadings at the court of the praetorian prefect, Anicius Probus, that the latter took him into his council, and later obtained for him from the Emperor Valentinian the office of consular governor of Liguria and Æmilia, with residence in Milan. "Go", said the prefect, with unconscious prophecy, "conduct thyself not as a judge, but as bishop". We have no means of ascertaining how long he retained the civic government of his province; we know only that his upright and gently administration gained for him the universal love and esteem of his subjects, paving the way for that sudden revolution in his life which was soon to take place. This was the more remarkable, because the province, and especially the city of Milan, was in a state of religious chaos, owing to the persistent machinations of the Arian faction.