

The special character and value of the writings of St. Ambrose are at once tangible in the title of Doctor of the Church, which from time immemorial he has shared in the West with St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and St. Gregory. He is an official witness to the teaching of the Catholic Church in his own time and in the preceding centuries. As such his writings have been constantly invoked by popes, councils and theologians; even in his own day it was felt that few could voice so clearly the true sense of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church (St. Augustine, *De doctrinâ christ.*, IV,46,48,50). Ambrose is pre-eminently the ecclesiastical teacher, setting forth in a sound and edifying way, and with conscientious regularity, the deposit of faith as made known to him. He is not the philosophic scholar meditating in silence and retirement on the truths of the Christian Faith, but the strenuous administrator, bishop, and statesman, whose writings are only the mature expression of his official life and labours. Most of his writings are really homilies, spoken commentaries on the Old and New Testaments, taken down by his hearers, and afterwards reduced to their present form, though very few of these discourses have reached us exactly as they fell from the lips of the great bishop. In Ambrose the native Roman genius shines out with surpassing distinctness; he is clear, sober, practical, and aims always at persuading his hearers to act at once on the principles and arguments he has laid down, which affect nearly every phase of their religious or moral life. "He is a genuine Roman in whom the ethico-practical note is always dominant. He had neither time nor liking for philosophico-dogmatic speculations. In all his writings he follows some practical purpose. Hence he is often content to reproduce what has been already treated, to turn over for another harvest a field already worked. He often draws abundantly from the ideas of some earlier writer, Christian or pagan, but adapts these thoughts with tact and intelligence to the larger public of his time and his people. In formal perfection his writings leave something to be desired; a fact that need not surprise us when we recall the demands on the time of such a busy man. His diction abounds in unconscious reminiscences of classical writers, Greek and Roman. He is especially conversant with the writings of Virgil. His style is in every way peculiar and personal. It is never wanting in a certain dignified reserve; when it appears more carefully studied than is usual with him, its characteristics are energetic brevity and bold originality. Those of his writings that are homiletic in origin and form betray naturally the great oratorical gifts of Ambrose; in them he rises occasionally to a noble height of poetical inspiration. His hymns are a sufficient evidence of the sure mastery that he possessed over the Latin language." (Bardenhewer, *Les pères de l'église*, Paris, 1898, 736 - 737; cf. Pruner, *Die Theologie des heil. Ambrosius*, Eichstadt, 1864.) For convenience sake his extant writings may be divided into four classes: exegetical, dogmatic, asceticomoral, and occasional. The exegetical writings, or scripture-commentaries deal with the story of Creation, the Old Testament figures of Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and the patriarchs, Elias, Tobias, David and the Psalms, and other subjects. Of his discourses on the New Testament only the lengthy commentary on St. Luke has reached us (*Expositio in Lucam*). He is not the author of the admirable commentary on the thirteen Epistles of St. Paul known as "Ambrosiaster". Altogether these Scripture commentaries make up more than one half of the writings of Ambrose. He delights in the allegorico-mystical interpretation of Scripture, i.e. while admitting the natural or literal sense he seeks everywhere a deeper mystic meaning that he converts into practical instruction for Christian life. In this, says St. Jerome (Ep.xli) "he was disciple of Origen, but after the modifications in that master's manner due to St. Hippolytus of Rome and St. Basil the Great". He was

also influenced in this direction by the Jewish writer Philo to such an extent that the much corrupted text of the latter can often be successfully corrected from the echoes and reminiscences met with in the works of Ambrose. It is to be noted, however, that in his use of non-Christian writers the great Doctor never abandons a strictly Christian attitude (cf. Kellner, *Der heilige Ambrosius als Erklärer des Alten Testaments*, Ratisbon, 1893).

The most influential of his ascetico-moral writings is the work on the duties of Christian ecclesiastics (*De officiis ministrorum*). It is a manual of Christian morality, and in its order and disposition follows closely the homonymous work of Cicero. "Nevertheless", says Dr. Bardenhewer, "the antitheses between the philosophical morality of the pagan and the morality of the Christian ecclesiastic is acute and striking. In his exhortations, particularly, Ambrose betrays an irresistible spiritual power" (cf. R. Thamin, *Saint Ambroise et la morale chrétienne au quatrième siècle*, Paris, 1895). He wrote several works on virginity, or rather published a number of his discourses on that virtue, the most important of which is the treatise "On Virgins" addressed to his sister Marcellina, herself a virgin consecrated to the divine service. St. Jerome says (Ep. xxii) that he was the most eloquent and exhaustive of all the exponents of virginity, and his judgment expresses yet the opinion of the church. The genuineness of the touching little work "On the Fall of a Consecrated Virgin" (*De lapsu virginis consecratae*) has been called in question, but without sufficient reason. Dom Germain Morin maintains that it is a real homily of Ambrose, but like so many more of his so-called "books", owes its actual form to some one of his auditors. His dogmatic writings deal mostly with the divinity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Ghost, also with the Christian sacraments. At the request of the young Emperor Gratian (375-383) he composed a defence of the true divinity of Jesus Christ against the Arians, and another on the true divinity of the Holy Ghost against the Macedonians; also a work on the Incarnation of Our Lord. His work "On Penance" was written in refutation of the rigoristic tenets of the Novatians and abounds in useful evidences of the power of the Church to forgive sins, the necessity of confession and the meritorious character of good works. A special work on Baptism (*De sacramento regenerationis*), often quoted by St. Augustine, has perished. We possess yet, however, his excellent treatise (*De Mysteriis*) on Baptism, Confirmation, and the Blessed Eucharist (P.L. XVI, 417-462), addressed to the newly baptized. Its genuineness has been called in doubt by opponents of Catholic teaching concerning the Eucharist, but without any good reason. It is highly probable that the work on the sacraments (*De Sacramentis*, *ibid.*) is identical with the preceding work; only, says Bardenhewer, "indiscreetly published by some hearer of Ambrose". Its evidences to the sacrificial character of the Mass, and to the antiquity of the Roman Canon of the Mass are too well known to need more than a mention; some of them may easily be seen in any edition of the Roman Breviary (cf. Probst, *Die Liturgie des vierten Jahrhunderts und deren Reform*, Münster, 1893, 232-239). The correspondence of Ambrose includes but a few confidential or personal letters; most of his letters are official notes, memorials on public affairs, reports of councils held, and the like. Their historical value is, however, of the first order, and they exhibit him as a Roman administrator and statesman second to none in Church or State. If his personal letters are unimportant, his remaining discourses are of a very high order. His work on the death (378) of his brother Satyrus (*De excessu fratris sui Satyri*) contains his funeral sermon on his brother, one of the earliest of Christian panegyrics and a model of the consolatory discourses that were henceforth to take the place of the cold and inept declamations of the Stoics. His funeral discourses on

Valentinian II (392), and Theodosius the Great (395) are considered models of rhetorical composition; (cf. Villemain, *De l'éloquence chrétienne*, Paris, ed. 1891); they are also historical documents of much importance. Such, also, are his discourse against the Arian intruder, Auxentius (*Contra Auxentium de basilicis tradendis*) and his two discourses on the finding of the bodies of the Milanese martyrs Gervasius and Protasius.

Not a few works have been falsely attributed to St. Ambrose; most of them are found in the Benedictine Edition of his writings (reprinted in Migne) and are discussed in the manuals of patrology (e.g. Bardenhewer). Some of his genuine works appear to have been lost, e.g. the already mentioned work on baptism. St. Augustine (Ep. 31, 8) is loud in his praise of a (now lost) work of Ambrose written against those who asserted an intellectual dependency of Jesus Christ on Plato. It is not improbable that he is really the author of the Latin translation and paraphrase of Josephus (*De Bell. Judaico*), known in the Middle Ages as Hegesippus or Egesippus, a distortion of the Greek name of the original author (*Iosepos*). Mommsen denies (1890) his authorship of the famous Roman law text known as the "*Lex Dei, sive Mosaicarum et Romanarum Legum Collatio*", an attempt to exhibit the law of Moses as the historical source whence Roman criminal jurisprudence drew its principal dispositions.