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FROM MILAN TO THE WORLD: AMBROSE AND THE CREATION OF A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

First of all, let me thank thank Prof. Robert Grant and Prof. Ethan Gannaway for inviting me to give a Keynote Address to this unique International Conference that the Academy for the Study of St. Ambrose of Milan has organized at St. Ambrose University, the only Roman Catholic University in the world named after the saint.

Feeling the weight of a great responsibility in doing this, I sought help from Paulinus of Milan, his secretary and, later, biographer. Three passages in particular from his *Life of St Ambrose* vividly show what kind of bishop, famous throughout the world, Ambrose was after around fifteen years in this role.

I. FROM MILAN TO THE WORLD

1. Ambrose and the Persians

«At the same time two of the most powerful and wisest men of the Persians, because of the fame of the bishop, came to Milan, bringing with them many questions that thereby they might make trial of wisdom of the great man, and with him they argued through an interpreter from the first hour of the day until the third hour of the night, and they went away full of wonder. And to show that they had come for no other reason than really to get better acquainted with the man of whom they had heard of by report, on the next day bidding farewell to the emperor they set out for the city of Rome, wishing there to become acquainted with the power of the illustrious man Probus; and when they had become acquainted with it they returned to their own home» (transl. Kaniecka, 67).

There are various reasons for suspecting this extract of being a biographer's invention. There is the recurrence of a frequent *topos* in the biographies of famous men, in which it was common to introduce figures from distant lands, who undertook long voyages for the sole purpose of meeting them. Paulinus also establishes a seemingly rather naive correspondence: as the two Persians were extremely powerful and learned, they wanted to test Ambrose's wisdom in Milan and acquaint themselves with Probus' power in Rome. The writer also excludes the possibility that these men from Persia were ambassadors on an official mission and, underlining that they merely wished to pay their respects to the emperor before leaving for Rome and after spending many hours with Ambrose, creates such a lack of symmetry between the time given to the bishop, that given to the emperor, and the fleeting visit to the powerful *vir illustris* Probus, as to suggest that the whole story was invented to exalt the bishop.

Though these observations, put together, might lead one to dismiss the episode as implausible, other historical considerations tend to confirm its truth. We need, first of all, to shed light on the date of this journey from distant Persia to Milan and Rome. Paulinus mentions it immediately after describing what had happened in Thessalonica in 390, so that the commentators of the *Vita Ambrosii* have thought that the phrase used to introduce it, *per idem tempus* (in that same period), was intended to place it around 391, when the news of the massacre ordered by Theodosius I and Ambrose's reaction to it could even have reached the East. However, as Probus might already have died in the course of 388, it has been suggested that the Latin word *potentia*, which appears at the end of the extract, might have the sense of *domus*, as if the Persians had gone, not to visit him, but his house, the famous *domus Aniciana*. But there is no need to force the text in this way.

Paolinus never uses the expression *per idem tempus* to give a precise chronological indication – something required neither in a biography nor, still less, in the *Life* of a saint. ‘In that same period’ is for Paolinus a convenient transitional phrase, frequently used to move from one subject to another and indicate by means of a general time reference that this second event happened more or less ‘at the same time’ as that described immediately before. Just before speaking of Thessalonica, the biographer recounted the episode of Callinicum, which took place in 388. The phrase might, then, have the sense of ‘in the same period’ as Callinicum. The little village was a place on the borders of Syria – now ar-Raqqah – from which the news could quickly have reached neighbouring Persia. According to Theoderet, if we accept an attractive conjecture by Palanque, Theodosius exclaimed on the very subject of Callinicum: ‘Now I know indeed that Ambrose alone has the right to be called a bishop’. Only then had the emperor finally understood what a bishop was. And Theodoret was bishop of Cyrrihus, a city about 60 kilometres from Berea (Aleppo) in Syria. What had happened in 388 in that Syrian settlement and its repercussions in Milan might have aroused no less interest than the meeting between emperor and bishop after the massacre of Thessalonica: in both cases the consequence was an unprecedented confrontation between the Christian bishop and the Roman emperor.

Obviously, the Christians of the Sasanian Empire were the first to be interested in these facts, but they were not alone in this. Intermittently persecuted for four decades, as testified in those very years by the so-called *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*– Shapur II dying in 379 (309-379) – they began to benefit from the détente between the two empires. And it was the peace treaty signed by Theodosius I with Shapur III in 387, ratifying the division of Armenia into a western region under the Eastern Roman Empire and an eastern one entrusted to the Sasanians, that improved the conditions of the Christians in the cities of Mesopotamia. Paolinus denies that the two learned and powerful Persians were ambassadors who had come to visit Theodosius in Milan, and he seems to be right in this. The agreements had already been completed in 387 and their journey was probably the first result of a treaty that – like all the pacts that had been stipulated with Persia since Constantine – entailed guarantees for the tolerance of Christians by the new Sasanian authorities. This tolerance, however, did not mean full rights of existence as Christians, and it took many more meetings and negotiations in the next ten years before, in 399, the King of Kings Yazdegird recognized the right of Christians to meet in synods and gave the Bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon the title of *katholikos*, spokesman of all the Christians in his empire.

We may suppose that the arrival of the two Persians in 388/389 was remembered as an exceptional event simply because, after the agreement of 387 and about fifty years of wars and treaties, it had inaugurated a new season of contacts between the two imperial courts, but with unofficial visitors whose destination was Milan and Rome, not Constantinople. What kind of information they were interested in acquiring may be deduced from those they contacted. Sextus Claudius Petronius Probus, who may still have been alive in 388 and willing to receive them in his luxurious Roman residence, had dominated the western scene for twenty years, had been repeatedly in charge of the most important praetorian prefecture in the West during the reigns of Valentinian I, Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius I. He had suggested appointments, drafted treaties, covered sudden power gaps by supporting the acclamation of a new emperor, and had saved the life of the young Valentinian II and his mother, bringing them to Thessalonica when the usurper Maximus had invaded Italy, getting as far as Milan. For his part, Ambrose had then forged a new type of bishop-priest, re-employing a great Old-Testament model. In exercising a power of sanction over the emperor, he had transformed the humiliation of the baptized sovereign into the royal virtue of

humility. In their different ways, Ambrose and Probus were therefore the most suitable figures of the time to give concrete responses to those who wanted to understand the relations between Christianity and empire, and how the Christian faith might even modify the absolute power of an emperor, if he was a Christian and a baptized emperor.

After the Sack of Rome in 410 Probus' widow Anicia Faltonia Proba, was in Africa, staying with Augustine, like Paolinus. There she may well have mentioned to the biographer the unusual arrival of the two Persian guests in the West and the importance of the discussions in Milan and Rome. In 399 the good relations between the Roman and Persian empires had reached the point that, in his will, the Eastern emperor Arcadius (395-408) made Yazdegird I guardian of his son Theodosius, who was still a child, charging him to keep the throne for him. When he was writing the *Vita Ambrosii* in Africa around 420, Paolinus knew that the King of Kings was still honouring his commitment, so that that first exploratory journey of the two learned and powerful Persians that had inaugurated the new climate of détente between Rome and Persia appeared still more important..

The episode with which Paolinus shows that Ambrose's fame had then even reached the fabled land of Persia should certainly be regarded as a historical fact. This is further confirmed by Ambrose's detractors repeatedly underlining the 'bishop's proud intolerance', an effect of his 'worldly *potentia*', alluding to his previous experience as an imperial functionary and insinuating that his election by popular acclamation had been staged, orchestrated by Valentinian I in agreement with Probus, his plenipotentiary praetorian prefect. If the story of the two Persians had not been true, however great the *notarius* Paulinus' *simplicitas* may have been, it would have been truly incredible that he should have invented a story to extol his bishop that could be added to those his adversaries already had for denigrating him.

2. Ambrose and the Franks

A more complex example comes from a passage from the *Vita Ambrosii* that projects the fame of Ambrose's supposedly extraordinary powers beyond the borders of the Roman Empire to Northern Europe:

«At the same time Count Arbogast prepared war against his people, namely the Franks, and he valiantly routed a no small number in a battle, and with the rest he made peace. But when at a banquet he was asked by the princes of his nation whether he knew Ambrose, and he replied that he knew the man and was loved by him and was wont to dine with him frequently, he heard: 'So you conquer, Count, because you are beloved by that man who says to the sun: 'stand and it stands'. And so I have set this down that my readers may know what fame the holy man had even among barbarian peoples. For we also know this on the report of a certain young man of Arbogast, very religious, who was present; for at the time at which they said these things he was cupbearer (transl. Kaniecka, 73).

It is somewhat difficult to believe that the Franks beyond the borders, who were pagans down to the late fifth or early sixth century, were familiar with the biblical phrase with which, after conquering Jericho, Ai and Gibeon, Joshua asked God to stop the sun and moon until he had conquered the Amorite kings and made himself master of Southern Canaan. It may have been 'the most pious young man in the service of Arbogast', a witness of the episode and one of Paulinus' direct sources, who gave a biblical re-reading of the conversation between the Frankish chieftains. Or, more probably in my view, it was Paulinus himself who formulated the phrase in question. Assimilating Ambrose to Joshua, the minister of Moses who, inspired by a divine vision, had conquered the Promised Land for his people, Paulinus made his bishop the real 'source' of the military victories of the Roman Empire, as for the liberation of Florence by Radagaisus and the clash between Mascezel and Gildon. Even without drawing on Scripture, however, it is plausible that, in peace talks over lunch with conquered enemies willing to be *foederati* of the empire, Arbogast should have boasted

of his friendship with a bishop whose great capacity for political negotiations and enormous generosity towards prisoners and the poor those Frankish chieftains were already familiar with.

The conversation in question took place after August 388, when Arbogast resided with the young Valentinian II (born in 371) and his mother Justina in Gaul, from which it was usual for a general to conduct punitive expeditions to the borders. In those years, though they had different roles, both Ambrose and Arbogast had been involved in some of the most important events in the life of the Roman Empire in the West. As he was still *comes rei militaris*, in 380 the Emperor Gratian had sent Arbogast to aid Theodosius I after the serious defeat of Adrianople, while in Milan Ambrose was using the proceeds of the sale of church plate to ransom the many prisoners that the Goths had taken during that battle. And, though, with two missions to Trier, Ambrose had managed to prevent Maximus from invading Italy after killing the Emperor Gratian at Lugdunum in 383, Arbogast had been the real author of the usurper's end. During the campaign that Theodosius had finally decided to undertake, it was he who had captured Maximus in 388 and killed his son Victor in Gaul. And so Arbogast and Ambrose had often crossed each other's path in those years.

On the other hand, Valentinian II was found dead on 25 May 392 – hanged in his quarters in Vienne. Arbogast claimed it was suicide, and this was probably true, but various versions were circulating and Zosimus (drawing on Eunapius' contemporary account) reported that Valentinian II was assassinated by Arbogast outside Vienne in front of his soldiers. For his part Ambrose preferred to pass over the causes of death in his funeral speech for the young emperor. A few months later, however, on 22 August 392, Arbogast opted for open rebellion, proclaiming Flavius Eugenius emperor at Lugdunum.

According to Paolinus, before joining battle against Theodosius I at the Frigidus, Arbogast and Nicomachus Flavianus Senior, the praetorian prefect, promised that, if they returned as victors, «they would turn the Basilica of Milan into a stable, and enlist the clergy in the army». Many have wondered how to reconcile such contradictory information as Paolinus provides in two closely placed passages in the *Vita Ambrosii*. Alan Cameron has recently questioned the substance of those threats: 'The threat about the clergy is sufficiently unrealistic to look more like a joke, and the threat about the stable is a commonplace'. Taking the latter first, supposing that it was a commonplace, it only became one after the Frigidus, as the oldest allusion to such a threat is in a letter from Jerome to Heliodorus on the death of Nepotian, dated with certainty to 396. As for 'enlisting the clergy in the army', this was anything but unrealistic. Two laws emanated in the space of a few months in 383, in Milan and Constantinople, and confirmed later by Theodosius I in 386, threatened to enlist the curial clergy if they had not left their goods to a close relative or city council before taking their vows. It did not mean enlisting in the army as such, but the many public services (*munera civilia*) required of members of the curia, from which the clergy were exempt, were a burden both on the time and financial resources of citizens, who were obliged to perform them both on the basis of birth (*origo*) and personal means (*possidendi condicio*). This means that Arbogast and Nicomachus Flavianus Senior should have been able to allude to the fact that, if victory was theirs, they would not grant another amnesty to any clergy who had broken the law previously, as Theodosius I had done in 390, probably under pressure from Ambrose.

Cameron, however, also challenges the author of these threats. Referring to the Battle of the Frigidus, Ambrose recalled 'faithless and sacrilegious men threatening the churches of the Lord with cruel persecution', without naming these pagans. Paolinus may have been mistaken, then, in attributing the phrase to Arbogast too, who could not have proclaimed such familiarity with the bishop if he had been a pagan. Indeed, for Cameron, Arbogast was Christian and of Christian parentage, being the son of Bauto, who, according to Ambrose, was Christian.

Here is not the place to discuss the validity of Cameron's original view that only a small number of Roman aristocrats such as Quintus Aurelius Simmachus and Nicomachus Flavianus Senior were still pagans at the end of the fourth century. But, quite apart from the fact that the testimonies he cites to prove that Arbogast was a Christian are disputable, Ambrose, for example, did not hesitate to defend Bauto against Maximus, who accused him of seeking the kingdom for himself in the

name of Valentinian II, unleashing the barbarians against him (*qui sibi regnum sub specie pueri vindicare voluit, qui etiam barbaros mihi inmisit*), although in 384 it was Bauto and Rumoridus (who was also a Frank) who had opposed Ambrose and initially supported the petition of the pagan aristocrats who wanted to restore the altar of Victory in the curia. Thanks to his extraordinary military talent, Bauto replaced the pagan Praetextatus, who had been designated consul for 385, after the latter's sudden death in December 384, and it was Augustine, the official orator of Milan before his conversion, who delivered the panegyric. We can get some idea of the influence this Frankish general then enjoyed, as well as of his probable wealth, from the fact that his daughter Aelia Eudoxia, who had moved to Constantinople after her father's death on 27 April 395, married the son of Theodosius I, the emperor Arcadius. Whatever their faith, Ambrose had relations with powerful senators and no less influential barbarian chieftains, with emperors and usurpers, and so the fact that he had frequent contact with Arbogast is no proof at all of the latter's Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, Arbogast was regarded by some as responsible for the suicide of the weak Valentinian II and, in encouraging the ambitions of the usurper Flavius Eugenius against Theodosius I, was the first of those German *magistri militum*, often called 'emperor makers' (Kaisermacher), who dominated the last two centuries of the Roman Empire and helped bring about its end. After the death of Valentinian II and the suicide of Arbogast at the Frigidus, it would not have been expedient to mention that Ambrose had been his friend and had often dined with him, had it not been true. In fact, it was well known, and even Ambrose's admirers who used many aspects of his style as a bishop to fashion one of their own of ascetic sanctity that was only apparently very different, mentioned Ambrose's sociability in his episcopacy in inviting consuls and prefects to dine (*qui eo tempore consules et praefectos subinde pascere ferebatur*). Ambrose did not entertain only his colleagues in Italy and the more distant regions of the empire, such as Damasus of Rome or Basil of Caesarea. He welcomed many people who wished to meet him, including those from abroad. Though embellished by a taste for the exotic, Paolinus' account give an effective and reliable picture of the bishop and of the fame he had gained, not only in his city but also in distant lands.

3. Ambrose and the Marcomanni

Another example is the mention of Fritigil, queen of the Marcomanni in the final passage I want to quote from the *Vita Ambrosii*

«At the same time, Fritigil, a certain queen of the Marcomanni, when she heard of the fame of the man from the report of a certain Christian who had by chance come to her from the regions of Italy, believed in Christ, whose servant she recognized him to be, and sending gifts to the Church she asked through her envoys that she be informed by his own hand what she should believe. And to her he wrote a remarkable letter in the manner of a catechism, in which he urged her also to persuade her husband to keep peace with the Romans; when the woman received the letter she persuaded her husband to entrust himself and his people to the Romans. When she came to Milan, she grieved very much because she did not find the holy bishop to whom she had hastened; for he had already departed from this life (transl. Kaniecka, 79-81) ».

In Ambrose's letter to Fritigil, he exhorts her to accept Christianity as well as to keep peace with the Romans. Being both *Romanus et christianus*, he identified Christian faith with loyalty to Rome, so that peoples from beyond the borders were welcome only if they seemed willing to accept the empire and its laws. We have seen that Ambrose never refused to have close diplomatic relations with the new barbarian generals such as Bauto and Arbogast. They had usually been trained in Rome, they fought for the empire in the highest ranks of the army, and so it was of no consequence if they were still pagans as, for Ambrose, their choice of Roman civilization was a providential sign that conversion was certain and imminent. Besides, the celebration of Augustus as an 'emperor with Providence on his side', so that the *christiana tempora* coincided with the start of the Roman Empire, was not an innovation by Orosius. His idea, rather, exemplified faith in the empire's providential mission, which Eusebius may already have expressed when he created the myth of

Augustus as the first unwitting Christian emperor. Bishop Ambrose acted in the certainty that Roman universality was an inescapable condition of Christian Catholicism, and for that reason his fame extended, as Paulinus wanted to show, across all the lands of the earth. The references in the *Vita Ambrosii* clearly show that those foreign peoples mentioned were willing to accept the empire and its Christian-Catholic faith.

Ambrose's catechistical letter to Fritigil has been lost, like that sent to the boy Pansophius, whom the bishop had resuscitated in Florence. Nor does any other ancient source mention the Queen of the Marcomanni and her husband. However, some details in contemporary narratives confirm that, around 390, this people, who had created much alarm in the region, could then be exhorted by the Bishop of Milan to maintain good relations with Rome, as the Marcomanni had been at peace for twenty years (between 375 and 395). The Marcomanni were a tribe of Germanic origin who were initially stationed between the Elbe and the Oder, and who later emigrated to the land of the Boii (now Bohemia), where their king, Maroboduus, who had grown up at the court of Augustus, had managed to create a vast confederation of Germanic tribes loyal to Rome. When the balance of power changed both inside and outside the empire, during the period of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus, they had guided a powerful coalition against Rome, stoking the fires of a war that lasted nearly twenty years (from 162 to 180 in three phases): some of the significant campaigns in it are depicted on the column of Marcus Aurelius in Piazza Colonna in Rome.

After the late second century, apart from a fleeting appearance among the peoples that Diocletian and Galerius had succeeded in containing between 292 and 295, only during the reign of Valentinian I, at the beginning of Ambrose's episcopacy, did the Marcomanni return on the scene. Around 372/373 they joined the Quadi in sacking and pillage, burning *domus* and *villae*, and attacking and devastating harvests throughout the middle and lower Danube to avenge the killing of Gabinius, King of the Quadi. Ammianus describes the mighty fortifications the prefect Probus had built to protect Sirmium, seat of the praetorian prefecture, and the vigorous action against them by the youthful *dux Moesiae* and future emperor, Theodosius I. He succeeded in signing a lasting peace with both peoples, beginning that long period of alliance, during which it was also possible to begin the work of Christianization, which Paulinus attributes to one zealous Christian, evidently a member of Ambrose's Church.

Fritigil's journey to Milan immediately after the bishop's death in 397 also corresponds to events in that period. We know that in 396 Stilicho joined battle against the Huns who were crossing the lower Danube, and also against the Marcomanni who were pouring across the central Danube, sacking Noricum and Pannonia. Essentially, just as the first literary contact between Fritigil and Ambrose happened in the period of peace following Theodosius' campaigns, so the queen's journey to Milan in late 397 may have been conceived as part of an agreement in which Stilicho allowed the defeated Huns and Marcomanni to settle in the territory they had devastated in Pannonia and Noricum.

There is, then, historical confirmation of the passages in *Vita Ambrosii* that implicitly confirms the extensive relations Ambrose was so good in creating beyond the empire's borders, within those limits in which Christian and Roman universalism coincided.

II. THE MAKING OF A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

1. Ambrose, first aristocratic bishop of the Latin West

The extent of the fame Ambrose enjoyed as described by Paulinus reflected above all his experience. Born in Trier, brought up in Rome, he had come to Sirmium (near present-day Belgrade) as 'court advocate' of Sextus Claudius Petronius Probus, then *PPO per Illyricum Italiam et Africam*, and an assessor in his council, and later governor of a Roman province that extended from the region north of Florence to Lakes Maggiore and Como. In 374 he was finally acclaimed bishop in Milan, one of the four capitals of the late-antique empire, dominating the religious life

and the political scene for nearly a quarter of a century. His election was an exceptional event, not so much because an imperial official had been chosen as prelate, but because a man from the senatorial aristocracy in Rome was given that role – the first in the history of the Church and the Empire.

Nevertheless, Ambrose was not a scion of the most ancient and traditional aristocracy. There is a longstanding tradition that he descended on his mother's side from the *gens Aurelia*, the same as Avianius and Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, one of the richest and most powerful houses of late-ancient Rome. Specifically, the family relation between the Symmachi and Ambrose has been conjectured on the basis of the expression Symmachus *parens*, which Ambrose used in his funeral oration on his brother Satyrus, recalling the Senator's affectionate insistence not to leave for Northern Italy, exposed as it was to the danger of a barbarian invasion. This family tie seemed to be confirmed by the phrase '*Saturus frater communis*', which Quintus Aurelius Symmachus used in a letter to his brother Celsinus Titianus, because the term *frater* could be used for Satyrus. Neither the term *parens*, nor that of *frater*, however, is conclusive proof Ambrose was related to the Symmachi and the *gens Aurelia*. Two pages of concordances list Symmachus' *fratres*, some of whom, as he admits, were completely unknown to him, although they received or benefited from affectionate letters of introduction.

Ambrose's father, whom the bishop never refers to in his writings, and whose name and position only Paolinus, almost a century after his death, mentions, was a praetorian prefect in Gaul when Ambrose was born. Even now his identity is pure hypothesis. In my view, he was not Marcellinus *comes rei privatae* of Constans in 348/50, as has recently been suggested. I find it more likely that he was the official called Uranius – the same name as that of Ambrose's brother, Uranius Satyrus –, who was the recipient in 339 of an edict ordering an extraordinary tax levy:

CTh XI, 1, 5 IDEM A. scil. IMP CONSTANTIUS A. sed rectius IMP<PP. CONSTANTINUS> CONSTANTIUS <ET CONSTANS AA> A. AD URANIUM: Omnes omnino ad oblationem pecuniarum oportet urgueri. Lege enim nostra signatum est nec esse extraordinaria nec vocari, quae specialiter a provincialibus devotissimis conferenda sunt. DAT. III NON. FEB. CONSTANTIO A. II ET CONSTATE <A.> CONSS.

CTh XI, 1, 5. THE SAME AUGUSTUS (scil. CONSTANTIUS AUGUSTUS), but better EMPEROR<S CONSTANTINUS> CONSTANTIUS <AND CONSTANS AUGUSTI> TO URANIUS: Absolutely everyone must be compelled to make the tax payments in money. For it is indicated by Our law that the taxes which must be specifically paid by Our most devoted provincials are not extraordinary and they must not be so called. GIVEN ON THE THIRD DAY BEFORE THE NONES OF FEBRUARY IN THE YEAR OF THE SECOND CONSULSHIP OF CONSTANTIUS AUGUSTUS AND THE CONSULSHIP OF CONSTANS (February 3, 339) (transl. Pharr, 291).

Only Constantine II is mentioned in the *inscriptio* of the law, but the laws were emanated by the whole imperial college, so that the names of all three emperors should be included. Constantine II's was cancelled when all his measures were abolished and his name erased from the inscriptions on being declared *publicus inimicus/hostis publicus* for trying to invade Italy and taking possession of the territory of his brother Constans, for which he was killed in April 340. With this revision of the law's *inscriptio*, then, there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that this law was sent by Constantine II to his prefect in Gaul in 339, to order additional taxation before his expedition against the Sarmatians, who were once again carrying out raids on the border of the Danube. The coincidence with Ambrose's possible date of birth in Trier in 338/339 supports the identification of this Uranius with the father of the future bishop. His name – using Paolinus' information – was therefore Uranius Ambrosius.

As he was a praetorian prefect in 339, barely fifteen years after Constantine's reform of the praetorian prefecture as a regional post, which is now dated to after 324, Uranius Ambrosius was not of noble birth. Important prosopographical studies on Constantine's prefects and their sons show that those we know of were all of noble birth, reaching the rank of senator with the title of *clarissimi* as a result of having been praetorian prefects. We also now know that Constantine had

reformed the office in favour of men who were well educated, expert in the law, and above all possessed of the administrative abilities that a long bureaucratic career in offices in different parts of the empire would provide. The education, training and careers of Ambrose and his brother Satyrus confirm the fact that their father wanted his sons to have that kind of upbringing to guarantee their upward social mobility. Indeed, in the space of a few decades, because of the high political and administrative responsibilities involved, the office of praetorian prefect was the summit of a senatorial career and those who held the position and particularly their immediate descendants were treated with the respect previously reserved for the old nobility, with whom they were quickly assimilated. The new Constantinian nobility – of which Ambrose's father must be regarded as a member – was economically and socially akin in its behaviour to the traditional aristocrats. This was particularly so if the latter were already Christian, though there were no special religious restrictions. The younger members of the new nobility very quickly adopted culture, ideals and values of the traditional aristocracy. It is therefore certain that Ambrose was the first aristocratic bishop of the Latin West.

2. Clergy, bishops and believers

Palladius of Ratiaria, whom Ambrose had had removed from his office at the Council of Aquileia in 381 for his 'Arianism', accused him in fiercely polemical terms 'of instructing lectors and ministers of the church after his own fashion'. This was indeed the most significant result of Ambrose's activities as a bishop from the start. Ambrose's sermons and his particular style of life presented the manners, behaviour and language of the Roman aristocracy both to priests and bishops in Northern Italian dioceses, many of which he had himself created in those years, and to the prelates he had established in border areas that did not fall under his metropolitan jurisdiction. In fact, some of these seats, such as Sirmium, where he had been *advocatus*, or Thessalonica, which had been the seat of the Nicene Acolius, risked remaining or falling into the hands of Arian bishops. Travelling frequently, and industriously writing letters and publishing sermons and treatises, Ambrose was able to bring together in the Nicene faith an ecclesiastical group of very varied social extraction, who in the course of twenty years acquired a marked unity of purpose. This is clear from written works of the time by Zeno of Verona, Chromatius of Aquileia, Vigilus of Trent, Gaudentius of Brescia and Maximus of Turin, who disseminated the ideas, behaviour and values endorsed by Ambrose in their communities.

The bishop's main instructions, which are scattered throughout some letters to his colleagues, are also clearly expressed in the three books *de officiis* (*On Duties*), in which he reworked the sermons he had given in his first fifteen years as a bishop. Through extensive quotations from Scripture, the rules of the *de officiis* translated the culture and ideals of the late-antique aristocracy into Christian terms, following the structure and schema of thought in Cicero's work of the same name. Ambrose, in fact, also shared the taste for the classical of the late-fourth-century cultivated Roman circles, which led to a revaluation and imitation of the genres and styles of late-republican literary-artistic culture. The Roman orator of ancient times was also a model for the learned men depicted by Macrobius in his *Saturnalia*, and the priest was to share their same external manners – from how he held his head to his gait, from containing one's anger to remaining silent, or speaking at the proper time, without raising one's voice. He should attach great importance to the art of speech in his sermons, which should be both nourishing as milk and healing as balm, being designed to persuade God's people and overcome adversaries of the faith by vigour of intellect. Ambrose's priest would also share the ancient sage's modesty and sobriety, patience being an effective missionary weapon in a world still steeped in paganism.

He should also be generous to the poor and outcast, to the point of extreme acts of charity, so that the people would love him as their untiring defender. Nor did Ambrose wholly abandon the ancient ideas in describing the contexts and the meaning of Christian charity (*miser cordia*), which was primarily generosity to one's fellow-citizens. However, he made the act of giving something

different from the *liberalitas* of the rich Roman, whose energetic activity ensured his political advancement and helped reduce social imbalances and rioting in the cities. In a chapter of the *de officiis* designed to show the degrees of duties, *misericordia* is analysed as part of *beneficentia* for its great impact in the acquisition of the *dilectio multitudinis*. In the section of the *de officiis* on the effectiveness of *misericordia*, however, when he exhorts the reader to help others even beyond one's means, braving the slander of the 'hard-hearted', the bishop recalls distributing gold to the poor after selling the sacred plate of the church in Milan to free the prisoners held by the barbarians. For Ambrose, then, *misericordia* was not just a synonym of human justice, as it was for Cicero, because Christian charity was intended to reach a higher justice. He uses the same audacity with which he speaks of *misericordia* in the *de officiis* in describing Nature as a common mother in the *de Nabuthae historia*. This latter, like the *de officiis*, was also revised, incorporating over fifteen years of sermons, around 388/389 – significantly at the time when Theodosius was in the West. In that work too, interpreting theologically the relation between the natural community of goods and private property, he showed how one might achieve greater justice through charity.

Ambrose did not condemn wealth. It might constitute a serious obstacle for the *mali divites* and, when used wickedly, he saw it as the real cause of those natural upheavals and famines that the urban prefect Quintus Aurelius Symmachus saw as due to the ancient gods being abandoned. However, wealth was an instrument of virtue (*adiumenta virtutis*) for good people, as one could then carry out one's Christian duties and, through charity, solve that crisis of social relations that the abuses of the powerful, expropriations and the exploitation of the wretched farm labourers had caused. Some priests in Northern Italy felt strongly the effects of Ambrose's views and responded to the concern of those who feared they would suffer the punishment God reserved for the rich, reassuring them as Gaudentius of Brescia reassured Benevolus, a former imperial official and leader of the *honorati* citizens, and one of the richest men in the city: 'God made you rich not out of malice but providence, so that you might find medicine for the wounds of your sins in works of mercy'.

Assiduous in prayer, vigils and abstinence, Ambrose was also severe in his chastity, recommending it to his priests too. Previously regarded as an elite prerogative of late-pagan aristocratic circles, asceticism – experienced not as an eremite but as a pastor of souls – elevated the spirit in prayer and meditation, assimilating the bishop to extraordinary figures of classical antiquity and Holy Scripture: to Scipio Africanus, cited by Cicero as one who had drawn immediately effective practical energy from the vigour of mind achieved in *otium* for contact with the divinity; as well as the biblical Elisha, a thaumaturgic prophet, miracle-worker and counsellor of kings, to whom Elijah had made the symbolic gift of his sheepskin cloak. In some particularly significant letters – such as that to Anisius of Thessalonica on the death of Acolius, who was celebrated as the real author of the victory over the Goths after Adrianopolis by virtue of his sanctity – and, above all, in constructing his own public image, Ambrose managed to form a new type of priest, one possessing extraordinary virtues – which Paolinus translated into a long series of miraculous events – because enjoying divine favour in public manifestations of his authority.

3. The bishop and the emperor, 'believer among believers'

Though Ambrose addressed emperors in tones that seemed to revive the centuries-long debate between the imperial regime and the senate, the priest's authority did not come just from his ability to transpose the power of the great Roman senators into pastoral activity, devotional life and ecclesiastical policy. Rather, Ambrose's priest was equipped with a divine mission in defence of his church. And, by virtue of that mission, he also had the task of confining imperial behaviour that seemed unfavourable to Christians to the principle that he had been the first to formulate: 'the emperor is in the Church, not above the Church'. The facts are well known and I shall only review them quickly to show how strongly the bishop was tied to his community.

At the end of the summer of 384, between the corn and the grape harvest, knowing that the senate was trying to have the altar of Victory relocated in the curia of the Senate and was asking to have the anti-pagan measures taken by Gratian in 382 abrogated, Ambrose declared that if the emperor were to assent to this, it would seem a sacrilege 'to the bishops', on a level with the persecution of a pagan tyrant, and would merit excommunication. It was the episcopal community of the whole peninsula that was evoked, since Ambrose did not act only for himself and for the prelates of Northern Italy, but also for Damasus in Rome, thanks to whom he had been able to prevent the first senatorial legation from being received at court in 382 and heard by the emperor. Faced with the possibility that the bishop's reaction, isolating Valentinian II, would further strain his government's already weak position, even those members of the consistory who had at first seemed in favour of rescinding Gratian's measures, had been forced to refuse the Roman Senate's requests.

The Milanese Christian community took a leading role during the serious crisis for the basilicas. When Ambrose was summoned to Court in 385, realizing from the letter of convocation what the prince had decided for the Basilica Portiana (San Vittore), he did not go to the Palace alone: 'As soon as the people knew I was going to the Palace, they burst in with such force that it was difficult to resist them'. The faithful even resisted the charge of the light armed troops of the *comes militaris* and only the bishop managed to keep them from open sedition, being assured by the emperor that 'no one would invade the basilica, which belonged to the Church'. Then, the following year, the whole populace – even its most active social members who belonged to the trade guilds, which the emperor had inflicted heavy fines on to dissuade them from rioting– rallied in defence of the city's churches. Besieged there with their bishop, they drew strength from the Hymns that Ambrose had written for them. Ambrose's adversaries criticized him for the revolutionary tendencies of his popular poetry. What was actually revolutionary in his hymns was that they 'turned those who could hardly be called disciples into masters' (*facti sunt igitur omnes magistri, qui vix poterant esse discipuli*). The spectacular *inventio martyrum*, which a timely divine inspiration suggested to the bishop, even convinced the Homoian Court that the Church was the daughter of a Christ who was God, able to work unexpected miracles through the action of his humble bishops.

The community of believers meeting for mass was again the active subject of the confrontation between Ambrose and Theodosius on the events of Callinicum. Presenting himself as the prophet Nathan – who spoke to David, guilty of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah the Hittite – Ambrose had already written to Theodosius from Aquileia when he had heard that the emperor had ordered the bishop of Callinicum to rebuild the synagogue that had been burnt down by the Christians. Reminding Theodosius that all his successes – his ascent to the throne, the provisioning of his armies, his military victories and his dynastic stability – came from God, he had entreated him to avoid apostasy by forcing a bishop to rebuild a place 'where Christ was denied'. It was during Sunday service, however, that the bishop, like the prophet Aaron whose walnut rod blossomed, according to the verse in Jeremiah, and 'who counsels what is useful to the salvation of the sovereign', ordered the emperor to revoke his measures, so that he could bring the ceremony to an end with the offering of the sacrifice, mentioning the emperor, among the offerers.

Ambrose dealt in the same way with the serious episode of the "massacre of Thessalonica", with whose populace he was tied by friendship for the deceased Acolius and the new prelate Anisius, who he had wanted to succeed him. General Butericus had been stoned to death there by the crowd, enraged by the arrest of a well-known circus rider, and this had led to the slaughter of many civilians in reprisal. The emperor's counter-order, which Ambrose had requested in a letter, had arrived too late to avoid the massacre. At this point – Ambrose recalled in his funeral speech for Theodosius I –, the emperor 'laid down all royal insignia ... wept publicly in church for his sin ... with tears and groans begged pardon.' Though the traditional story, of a Theodosius repulsed at the doors of the church, was a dramatized transposition of the dream Ambrose told the emperor he had had during the night,¹ the church and its members remained the fulcrum of the episode. Outside his Palace, a believer among believers, the baptized emperor was made aware of how vulnerable he

was, particularly if faced by a bishop like Ambrose, with the whole community united in their devotions.

ⁱ Ambr. Ep.extra coll. 11, 6 e 13-14. In tal senso Paredi 1960, 430 e Mc Lynn 326.