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Ambrosius, the Bishop who Defeated an Emperor

The close cooperation between the Empire and the Christian Church after the Edict of Mediolanum (Milano) in 313 led to a new social, political and cultural order called the Byzantine Symphony.

The Church had a very good framework for mission, but encountered another threat: the influence of the political partner. Therefore, members of the Church of the fourth century tried to overcome this new danger.

Their means was most of all a better delimitation of the “borders” between these two important and separate fields. AMBROSIUS, the bishop of Mediolanum, was one of the significant voices that rose against the abuses of the Empire.

Historical Framework

Having a broad experience in the imperial administration, as *Consularis Liguriæ et Æmiliæ*, AMBROSIUS of Mediolanum understood the necessity of the clear separation between political and religious duties.

He actually succeeded in emphasizing these limits in a quite difficult and complex historical period, when very different, stronger or weaker emperors came to power, one after the other. As an excellent diplomat and politician, AMBROSIUS knew how to deal with each of them in order to serve the interests and mission of the Church.

After the death of VALENTINIANUS I in 375, the Western part of the Empire was ruled by his two sons, GRATIANUS (375–388) and VALENTINIANUS II (375–392); while the Eastern part was taken by the Hispanic general THEODOSIUS after the tragic death of VALENS in 378.

The situation got even more complicated when GRATIANUS was killed in 388, and the Western part (except Italy and Africa) was controlled by MAXIMUS, supported by the legions from Britannia.¹

Emperor VALENTINIANUS II was also killed in the year 392, so EUGENIUS became the emperor for only about two years, before he was finally defeated by THEODOSIUS in the battle of Aquileia.²

1 PASINI Cesare, *Ambrogio di Milano. Azione e Pensiero di un Vescovo*. Milano, 1996. 89.

2 PAREDI Angelo, *Ambrogio e la sua Età*. Milano, 1960. 491, 500.

Despite all these political instabilities and enmities, which were mainly provoked by the various civil wars, Bishop AMBROSIOUS knew how to influence the most important political decisions.

The different relationships of the Christian Church and its leaders with the emperors were very diverse. In case of GRATIANUS, for instance, the bishop became a counsellor of the young ruler.³

On the other hand the relationship with VALENTINIANUS, still a child at that time, was much tenser because of the imperial favours granted to the adepts and believers of Arianism or Roman polytheism.

The most interesting relationship, however, was established with THEODOSIUS. The latter took important decisions in favour of Christians: he was baptised and he gave up the ancient title of *Pontifex Maximus* (supreme pontiff).

Furthermore, he made Christianity the official religion of the Empire through the Edict *Cunctos Populos* in 380; he forbade the religious sacrifices and the Olympic Games and closed many temples.⁴

On the other hand, he had an open conflict with the bishop of Milano because of the massacre that took place in Thessalonica at the initiative of THEODOSIUS, who wanted to heavily punish the population.

The emperor had to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation in order to avoid being excommunicated and had to be a penitent for eight long months before Christmas of the year 390.⁵

Political Doctrines of AMBROSIOUS

Historians considered AMBROSIOUS to be the archetype of the powerful Cardinal RICHELIEU and stressed his attempt to establish the legitimate borders between *Imperium* (Empire) and *Sacerdotium*.

He did not reject the general principles of the Byzantine Symphony, useful both for the State and for the Church at the same time, but tried to formulate a new unofficial *contract* of this cooperation.

First of all, he underlined the different fields of the two dignities: the emperor had no right whatsoever to rule the Church, because he was just a regular member of it, and had no longer the privileges of the Roman Pontifex Maximus.

Only the representatives of the Christian Church had the right to make decisions in the field of religious life, and therefore the attempt of the Roman Senator SYMMACHUS to reintroduce the statue of Victory in the Senate had no chance at all.

Even Emperor VALENTINIANUS II was forced to take into serious consideration the open protest of Bishop AMBROSIOUS, who warned the emperor on the rather negative effects of this grave *sacrilege*.⁶

AMBROSIOUS underlined the fact that the two institutions should have very different methods and quite differing means as well: "The priest should fulfil his task, and the emperor should fulfil his own."⁷

3 AMBROSIOUS of Mediolanum, *Letter I*. MPL XVI. Col. 876C–879A.

4 BARNES Timothy D., *Religion and Society in the Age of Theodosius*. In MEYNELL Hugo A. (ed.), *Grace, Politics and Desire*. Calgary, 1990. 160.

5 RAHNER Hugo, *L'glise et l' tat dans le Christianisme Primitif*. Paris, 1964. 107.

6 AMBROSIOUS of Mediolanum, *Letter XVII*. MPL XVI. Col. 962B.

7 AMBROSIOUS of Mediolanum, *The Sermon against Auxentius*. MPL XVI. Col. 1013A.

They could cooperate and transform people into good *Christian citizens*, but only if they did not mix their precise goals and tasks. He wrote in a letter to his sister MARCELLINA the following famous lines:

“Those who belong to God are not subdued to the power of the emperor.”⁸ The bishop accused AUXENTIUS, one of the promoters of Arianism, because he supported entrusting the administration of the Church to the state in order to gain manifold and important political privileges.

In his view, priests and the bishops should show respect to the political leaders, but they should not be frightened or influenced by them at all, because the real ruler and leader of the world is God.

The emperor should be within the Church, and not above it: “*Imperator enim intra Ecclesiam, non supra Ecclesiam est.*”⁹ He had to be aware that his kingdom was protected by the grace of God.

Also, he had to acknowledge that the representatives of the Church could be *divine messengers* in a social or political context. The imperial absolutism, however, the dream of Julius CÆSAR applied by the emperors of the first three centuries, encountered an unexpected obstacle: a formerly persecuted Church.

THEODOSIUS was also advised to follow the good example of David, because the whole Empire could be punished for the sins of its rulers. Penitence was no longer a personal option, but instead became a political issue.¹⁰

While the Roman imperial religion transformed its emperors into gods, Christianity forced them to accept again the status of human beings, and AMBROSIUS succeeded in anticipating in the fourth century the penitence that was to take place in Canossa in 1077.¹¹

We should not consider this event as an attempt to transform the Roman state into a Christian democracy, but we can rightly think that the Oriental idea of the divine ruler and the absolute power lost this way a quite important battle, after so many victories in the previous centuries.

On the other hand, AMBROSIUS was convinced that the representatives of the Church should not be involved in politics, but they should only react in very critical and crucial moments of history.

The role should have been that of a *common denominator* in a fragmented and divided world. AMBROSIUS, however, supported THEODOSIUS in his civil war, calling EUGENIUS *usurpator indignus* (unworthy and undignified usurper) and the Frank general ARBOGASTES *barbarus latro* (Barbarian robber).¹²

The bishop also accepted the idea of a *bellum iustum* (just war) that could defend the values of the Christian Empire. In a time when the Goths were gradually settling in the Balkans and the Persians and Germanic tribes were attacking the borders, he claimed the right to use force for defense.

8 AMBROSIUS of Mediolanum, *Letter XX*. MPL XVI. Col. 996B–997A.

9 AMBROSIUS of Mediolanum, *The Sermon against Auxentius*. MPL XVI. Col. 1018B.

10 CRACCO RUGGINI Lellia, *Potere Romano e Coscienza Etica Cristiana*. In DAL COVOLO Enrico – UGLIONE Renato (eds.), *Chiesa e Impero. Da Augusto a Giustiniano*. Roma, 2001. 138.

11 MCLYNN Neil B., *Ambrose of Milan. Church and Court in a Christian Capital*. Los Angeles – London, 1994. 331.

12 AMBROSIUS of Mediolanum, *Letter LXI*. MPL XVI. Col. 1186C.

The bishop wrote to VALENTINIANUS: All the people who are under the Roman rule fight for you, emperors and masters of the land, the way you also fight for the almighty God and for the holy faith in God.¹³

The ancient *Pax Romana* that was considered *Pax Deorum* (a gift of the gods) became a *Pax Christi*.¹⁴ Although he claimed the independency of the Church, AMBROSIUS did not intend to isolate Christians from Roman society.

His thought could be considered a kind of middle way between the Augustinian dichotomy and the Eusebian cooperation. He even used the famous expression of Saint AUGUSTINE of Hippo, *civitas superna* (the city from above).

Since it is different from the *civitas terrena* (city of the Earth), he therefore asked the members of the Church to be good citizens and to coexist with the *terræ filii* (children of the Earth).¹⁵

The framework provided by the state was necessary for the Church to survive in the anarchy of the world: “The wise people rule by force over the madness of the crowds, because those have to be ruled by force, obliged through the authority of power to obey the wise ones and to respect the laws.”¹⁶

Ecumenical Influence

The thought of AMBROSIUS is still very important in our contemporary society, because those who do not want to remember the lessons of history have indeed great chances to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Even though the citizens of many countries in the world live in largely secularized countries, the political power from time to time still tries to control and supervise the activities of the churches.

Even though many constitutions and basic laws in a lot of countries grant a clear separation between religion and society, the state is very much involved and it interferes in religious life in many places.

This involvement, however, may take very diverse forms, according to the different countries and traditions: it could be a direct and visible influence in the administrative field or just an indirect way, through the funds granted to the churches.

Contemporary religious leaders should really remember the prophetic voice of AMBROSIUS, the bishop of Milano, and they should not accept but firmly refuse the domination of the political structures.

Of course, the situation is different in the context of the actual process of *globalization*, because the symphonic relationship between the early Church and the Roman Empire became the *pluralistic* relationship between many Churches and several empires, but the problems remain similar.

The Christian Church must never become a mere institution of the state, isolated in the fields of education and social assistance, but it should be a respected partner

13 AMBROSIUS of Mediolanum, *Letter XVII*. MPL XVI. Col. 961B.

14 PIZZOLATO Luigi Franco, *Ambrogio e la Libertà Religiosa nel IV Secolo*. In DAL COVOLO Enrico – UGLIONE Renato (eds.), *Chiesa e Impero. Da Augusto a Giustiniano*. Roma, 2001. 282.

15 AMBROSIUS of Mediolanum, *Letter LXXIV*. MPL XVI. Col. 1256C.

16 AMBROSIUS of Mediolanum, *Letter XXXVII*. MPL XVI. Col. 1085C–D., 1086A.

who is able to influence the decisions of the state, of course according to the Christian understanding and social teachings.

The political leaders could be either *intra Ecclesiam* (within the Church), or even *extra Ecclesiam* (outside the Church), but in any case, as AMBROSIUS well stressed, *non supra Ecclesiam* (not at all over the Church).

The Christian *ecumenical* movement plays a great and significant role in this field as well because the denominations could be much stronger, provided they react together to the challenges posed by the secular world and by its political situations and decisions.

At the beginning of the XXIst century, the national and regional, political and social structures have a tendency to *coagulate* in order to form new modern empires in different parts of the world.

And at the same time, the religious world is still too much divided and it is basically unable to follow the rhythm of economic and political unions. Therefore, the ecumenical movement could be an effective solution, an answer proper and apt to the new challenges that the denominations have to face today.

One thousand six hundred and twenty-six years have passed since Emperor THEODOSIUS, highly influenced by Bishop AMBROSIUS of Milano, made Christianity the official religion of the Empire through the great Edict *Cunctos Populos*.

And in our age the contemporary denominations are not able even to mention the great and decisive role played by Christianity through centuries in the Constitution of the European Union (EU).

Of course, religious leaders should not be allowed to get involved in political life, but they still have the moral duty to influence the life of the modern empires, among others to fulfil the great testament of AMBROSIUS.

They have to accept and respect the civil structures, the legislation and the human rights, but at the same time they have to react together, to overcome the new challenges, to keep the Christian testimony in the secular modern empires alive and blossoming.

Suggested Reading

DAL COVOLO Enrico – UGLIONE Renato (eds.), *Chiesa e Impero. Da Augusto a Giustiniano*. Roma, 2001.

MCLYNN Neil B., *Ambrose of Milan. Church and Court in a Christian Capital*. Los Angeles – London, 1994.

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