

## LESSON SIXTEEN – Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom and Jerome

### Ambrose of Milan

- It was in the year 373 that the death of the bishop of Milan threatened the peace of that important city. Auxentius, the dead bishop, had been appointed by an Arian emperor who had exiled the previous bishop.
- Now that the bishop's seat was vacant, the election of a successor could easily turn into a riot, for both Arians and orthodox were determined that one of their number would be the next bishop of Milan.
- In order to avoid a possible riot, Ambrose, the governor of the city, decided to attend the election. His efficient and fair rule had made him popular.
- Therefore, he appeared at the church, where tempers were flaring and addressed the crowd. He was trained in the best of rhetoric, and as he spoke calm was restored.
- Suddenly, from the midst of the crowd, a child cried, "Ambrose, bishop." This caught the fancy of the crowd, and the insistent cry was heard: "Ambrose bishop; Ambrose! Ambrose!"
- Since he was only a catechumen, and therefore was not even baptized it was necessary to perform that rite and then to raise him through the various levels of ministerial orders. All this was done in 8 days and he was consecrated bishop of Milan on December 1<sup>st</sup> 373.
- To help him in the administrative chores, he called on his brother, Uranius Satyrus, who was governor of another province.
- Ambrose also undertook the study of theology with the help of Simplicianus, a priest who had taught him the basics of Christian doctrine, and whom Ambrose now called to be his tutor in theology.
- Ambrose contributed to the development of Trinitarian theology in the West by popularizing the work of the Cappadocians – particularly Basil's treatise *On the Holy Ghost*. He also emphasized the centrality of the incarnation, which he discussed in pastoral rather than in speculative terms:

**“He became a small babe so that you could be fully grown, perfect human beings; he was wrapped in swaddling clothes so that you might be freed from the bonds of death; he came to a manger to bring you to the altar; he was on earth so that you might be in heaven.”<sup>1</sup>**

- Ambrose was also very involved in the formation of the clergy that would work with him and to this end wrote *Duties of the Clergy*, a treatise that was influential in shaping the understanding of Christian ministry long after Ambrose's death.
- Shortly after Ambrose's consecration, the nearby region was ravaged by a band of Goths who had crossed the border with imperial permission but had then rebelled.
- Refugees flocked to Milan, and there was news of many captives for whom the Goths were demanding ransom.
- Ambrose's response was to order that funds be raised for the refugees and for ransoming the captives by melting some of the golden vessels and other ornaments the church

possessed. This created a storm of criticism, particularly among the Arians, who were eager to find him at fault and accused him of sacrilege. Ambrose answered:

**“It is better to preserve for the Lord souls rather than gold. He who sent the apostles without gold also gathered the churches without gold. The church has gold, not to store it, but to give it up, to use it for those who are in need...it is better to the living vessels, than the golden ones.”<sup>2</sup>**

- The Western portion of the empire was ruled by Gratian and his half-brother Valentinian II. Since the latter was still a child, Gratian was also regent in his domain. Gratian was then killed in a rebellion and the usurper, Maximus threatened to take Valentinian's territories.
- The boy emperor was defenseless, and therefore, in a desperate move, he and his mother Justina sent Ambrose as an ambassador to Maximus. The bishop was successful and the expected invasion was averted.
- In spite of this, relations between Ambrose and Justina were not good. The empress was Arian and insisted on having a basilica where Arian worship could be celebrated. Ambrose refused to allow this.
- Thus followed a long series of memorable confrontations. At one point Ambrose and his followers were besieged by imperial troops with a clash of arms. Ambrose rallied his flock by singing hymns and Psalms. Finally, Justina sought an honorable retreat by demanding that, if not the church, at least its sacred vases be delivered to the emperor. After all, had not Ambrose done as much for a mob of refugees and captives? Again, the bishop refused and answered:

**“I can take nothing from the temple of God, nor can I surrender what I received, not to surrender, but to keep. In so doing I am helping the emperor, for it is not right for me to surrender these things, nor for him to keep them.”<sup>3</sup>**

- Eventually, with the apparent connivance of Justina, Maximus invaded Valentinian's territories. Part of the arrangement was probably that Maximus would rid the empress of the annoying bishop of Milan.
- But the Eastern emperor, Theodosius intervened and defeated Maximus. When Valentinian was killed, Theodosius intervened once again, and became the sole ruler of the empire.
- Theodosius was a Nicene Christian and it was under him that the Council of Constantinople gathered in 381 and affirmed the decisions of Nicaea.
- In spite of this and for other reasons, he clashed with Ambrose on two separate occasions.
- The first clash took place when some overzealous Christians in the small town of Callinicum burned a synagogue. The emperor decided that they be punished and that they must rebuild the synagogue. Ambrose protested that a Christian emperor should not be forcing Christians to build a Jewish synagogue. After several stormy discussions, the emperor yielded, and the synagogue was not rebuilt and the arsonists were not punished. This was a sad precedent, for it meant that in an empire calling itself Christian, those of a different faith would not be protected by the law.

- The other conflict between Ambrose and Theodosius was different and, in that conflict, justice was on Ambrose's side. There had been a riot in Thessalonica, and the commandant of the city had been killed by the rioters. Ambrose, who knew the touchy temperament of the emperor, went to him and counseled moderation.
- Theodosius seemed convinced, but later his wrath was rekindled and he decided to make an example of the disorderly city. He sent word that the riot had been forgiven and then, by his order, the army trapped those who had gathered at the arena to celebrate the imperial pardon, and slaughtered some 7000 of them.
- Upon learning of these events, Ambrose resolved to demand a clear sign of repentance from the emperor. Although the details are not clear, one of Ambrose's biographers tells us that the next time Theodosius went to church in Milan, the bishop met him at the door, raised his hands before him and said:

**“Stop! A man such as you, stained with sin, whose hands are bathed in the blood of injustice, is unworthy, until he repents, to enter this holy place, and to partake of communion.”<sup>4</sup>**

- At that point, some courtiers threatened violence, but the emperor acknowledged the truth in Ambrose words, and gave public signs of repentance.
- After that clash, relations between Theodosius and Ambrose improved and when the emperor knew that death was near, he called to his side the only man who had dared censure him in public.
- By then Ambrose fame had reached Fritigil, the Germanic queen of the Marcomanni and she asked him to write for her a brief introduction to the Christian faith. After reading it, Fritigil resolved to visit the wise man in Milan but on her way, she learned that Ambrose had died, on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 397, Easter Sunday.

## **John Chrysostom**

**One hundred years after his death, John of Constantinople, was given the name by which subsequent generations would know him: Chrysostom – “the golden-mouthed.”<sup>5</sup>**

- That was a title well deserved, for in a century that gave the church such great preachers as Ambrose of Milan and Gregory of Nazianzus, John of Constantinople stood above all the rest, a giant above the giants of his time.
- But for John, the pulpit was not simply a podium from which to deliver his brilliant pieces of oratory, it was rather the verbal expression of his entire life.
- John Chrysostom was above all a monk. Before becoming a monk, he was a lawyer, trained in his native Antioch by the famous pagan orator Libanius. It is said that when someone asked the old teacher who should succeed him, he responded:

**“John, but the Christians have laid claim on him.”<sup>6</sup>**

- Anthusa, John's mother, was a fervent Christian who loved her children with a deep and possessive love. She was overjoyed when her lawyer son, then twenty years of age, asked that his name be added to the list of those training for baptism.

- John spent four years learning the discipline of monastic life, and two more rigorously practicing it in complete solitude. Later, he would admit that such a life was not the best kind of training for the shepherd's task.

**“Many who have gone from monastic retreat to the active life of the priest or the bishop are completely unable to face the difficulties of their new situation.”<sup>7</sup>**

- John returned to Antioch after his six years of monastic withdrawal and was ordained as a deacon and then a presbyter shortly after.
- In 397, the bishopric of Constantinople became vacant and the emperor ordered John be taken to the capital city to occupy the position. Once arriving he was consecrated as a bishop early in 398.
- Constantinople was a rich town, and one given to luxury and intrigue. The great Emperor Theodosius was dead and the two sons who succeeded him, Honorius and Arcadius, were indolent and inept.
- Arcadius, who supposedly ruled the East from the capital city of Constantinople, was in fact ruled by a certain Eutropius, the palace chamberlain, who used his power to satisfy his own ambition and that of his cronies.
- Eudoxia, the empress, felt humiliated by the chamberlain's power, though in fact it was Eutropius who had arranged her marriage to Arcadius. The bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus had been actively campaigning in favor of a fellow Alexandrian and John had been given the position through Eutropius's intervention.
- The new bishop of Constantinople was not completely aware of all this but from what we know of his character, if he had been aware, it is probable he would have acted just as he did.
- The first task John undertook was to reform the life the clergy. Some priests who claimed to be celibate had in their homes what they called “spiritual sisters,” and this was an occasion of scandal to many. Other clergymen had become rich and lived with as much luxury as the potentates of the great city.
- The finances of the church were in shambles and the care of the flock was largely unattended. John took all of these issues head on.
- But such a reformation could not be limited to the clergy. It was also necessary that the laity also be called to lead lives more in accordance with the gospel. The bold preacher thundered from the pulpit:

**“The gold bit on your horse, the gold circlet on the wrist of your slave, the gilding on your shoes, mean that you are robbing the orphan and starving the widow. When you have passed away, each passerby who looks at your great mansions will say, “how many tears did it take to build that mansion; how many orphans were stripped; how many widows wronged; how many laborers deprived of their honest wages?” Even death itself will not deliver you from your accusers.”<sup>8</sup>**

- The powerful could not abide that voice that challenged them from the pulpit of Hagia Sophia, the church of Saint Sophia, the largest in Christendom.

- Eventually a storm broke out over the right of asylum. Some fled the tyranny of Eutropius and took refuge in the Hagia Sophia. The chamberlain sent soldiers after them but the bishop did not waver and refused to allow the soldiers to enter the sanctuary.
- Eutropius protested before the emperor while John took up his cause from the pulpit and for once Arcadius did not bow before the requests of his favorite.
- A series of political circumstances followed leading to Eutropius's downfall. The people were jubilant and soon there were mobs demanding vengeance against the one who had oppressed and exploited them. The chamberlain's only recourse was to seek asylum in the Hagia Sophia just like those who had previously fled his tyranny had.
- When the mob came after Eutropius, John stood in their way and invoked the same right to asylum he had invoked earlier for those fleeing Eutropius.
- The crisis came to an end when the former chamberlain, not trusting the defenses of the church fled his refuge and was captured and killed by some of the many he had wronged.
- John had made more enemies among the powerful. Eudoxia, the emperor's wife, resented the bishop's growing power.
- When John left the city in order to attend to some matters in Ephesus, Eudoxia joined Theophilus of Alexandria in plotting against the meddling preacher. Upon his return, John found himself the object of a long list of ridiculous charges brought before a small gathering of bishops convened by Theophilus.
- He paid no attention to them, and simply went about his preaching and his management of the church. Theophilus and his cohorts found John guilty and asked Arcadius to banish him. Prodded by Eudoxia, the weak emperor agreed to the request and ordered John to leave the city.
- The situation was tense. The bishops and other clergy from neighboring towns gathered at the capital and pledged their support to John. One word from the eloquent bishop and the entire conspiracy against him would crumble.
- Arcadius and Eudoxia were aware of this and made ready for war. John was a lover of peace and therefore made ready for exile. Three days after receiving the imperial edict, he bid farewell to his friends and followers and surrendered to the authorities.
- The populace was not ready to give up without a struggle. The streets were humming with rumors of mutiny.
- After a few months of additional intrigue, confrontation and humiliation, John received a new imperial order of exile. Once again, he quietly surrendered himself to the soldiers who came for him.
- Riots were inevitable and mobs flocked the Hagia Sophia. The army was ordered to quell the disturbance and in the struggle the cathedral and several other public buildings nearby caught fire and were destroyed. The cause of the fire was never discovered.
- Meanwhile John was exiled to a remote village. He lacked a pulpit so he took up the pen. Innocent, the bishop of Rome, took up John's cause and many followed his example.
- The emperor's actions were criticized from every quarter. Theophilus of Alexandria had no support except from a timid few who dared not oppose imperial power.

- As the controversy became widespread the little town of Cucusus, where John had been exiled, seemed to become the center of the world. Empress Eudoxia died and some hoped the emperor would reverse the edict of exile, but he did not.
- In the West, Pope Innocent and many others were convinced that a great injustice was being committed and appealed to Arcadius's Western counterpart, Honorius.
- Honorius sent a Latin delegation to the East armed with a letter to Arcadius indicating that they should be granted full respect and that a synod should be convened in Salonika to discuss the charges brought against John.
- If the Latin delegation determined John's exile was just, Honorius would break communication with him but if the exile was not just, Arcadius should restore him to his position in Constantinople.
- Instead of respect, the Latin delegation was given what Innocent called a "Babylonian treatment," and were imprisoned, tortured and offered a bribe of 3000 gold pieces, which they refused, and then sent home on a leaky boat that soon began to sink. In their report to Innocent, they said the soldiers told them that the captain of the ship had been given orders to see that they did not make it home. Eventually after changing ships, they did make it back to Italy.
- John's supporters were also all exiled and silenced. John was then ordered to an even more remote place of exile. The soldiers guarding him were aware that their charge did not have the goodwill of the emperor and paid no attention his failing health driving him to exertions beyond his strength while they escorted him to his new place of exile.
- Soon the banished bishop became seriously ill. When he perceived that death was near, he asked to be taken to a small church by the roadside. There he took communion, bid farewell to those around him and preached his shortest but most eloquent sermon: "In all things, glory to God. Amen."
- In Constantinople and elsewhere, people felt that a great injustice and even a sacrilege had been committed. John's staunchest supporters refused the authority of the new bishop and of those in communication with him, particularly the bishops of Alexandria and Antioch. This schism only ended when 31 years after John's death, his memory was restored and his body brought back to Constantinople amid great celebration.

## Jerome

**None of the great personalities of the 4<sup>th</sup> century are more intriguing than Jerome. He is remembered, not for his piety, like Anthony, nor for his theological insight like Athanasius, nor for his firmness before authorities like Ambrose, nor even for his preaching like Chrysostom, but rather for his great and endless struggle with the world and with himself. He is known as "Saint Jerome," but he was not one of those saints who are granted the joy of God's peace in this life. His holiness was not humble, sweet or peaceful but rather stormy, proud and even bitter.<sup>9</sup>**

- He always strove to be more than human and therefore had little patience for those who appeared indolent or who dared to criticize him.

- Those who suffered his sharp attacks were not only the heretics of his day and the ignorant and hypocritical, but also John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, Basil of Caesarea and Augustine.
- Those who disagreed with Jerome were “two-legged asses.” Despite this attitude, Jerome earned a place among the great Christian figures of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- Jerome was born around 348 in an obscure corner of northern Italy.
- He was an ardent admirer of classical learning and felt that this love for an essentially pagan tradition was sinful. His inner turmoil on this score peaked when, during a serious illness, he dreamed he was at the final judgement and was asked:

**“Who are you?” “I am a Christian,” Jerome answered. But the judge replied: “You lie, you are a Ciceronian.”<sup>10</sup>**

- After that experience, Jerome resolved to devote himself fully to the study of Scripture and of Christian literature.
- Jerome was also obsessed with sex. When he retired to monastic life, he hoped to be rid of that burden but he was followed by his memories of the Roman dancers.
- In order to fill his mind with something that would take the place of the pleasures of Rome, he decided to study Hebrew.
- Eventually Jerome conceded that he was not made for the life of a hermit and returned to civilization. In Antioch he was ordained as a presbyter. He was at Constantinople before and during the Council of 381.
- He returned to Rome, where Bishop Damasus, a good judge of human nature, made him his private secretary and encouraged him to engage in further study and writing.
- It was Damasus who first suggested to Jerome a project that would eventually occupy most of his time, and would become his greatest monument: a new translation of Scripture into Latin.
- Jerome found a great deal of help amidst a group of rich and devout women who lived in the palace of a widow, Albina. Besides Albina, the most prominent members of the group included her widowed daughter Marcella, Ambrose’s sister Marcellina and the scholarly Paula, who with her daughter Eustochium, would play a leading role in the rest of Jerome’s life.
- The Bishop’s secretary visited the house regularly, for in its women he found devoted disciples, some of whom had become accomplished students of Greek and Hebrew.
- Jerome was not a tactful man, and he soon made enemies among the leaders of the church in Rome. When one of Paula’s daughters died, Jerome’s enemies, whom he had criticized for their comfortable life, claimed that her death was due to the rigors recommended by Jerome. Finally, he decided to leave Rome and go to the Holy Land or as he said, “from Babylon to Jerusalem.”
- Paula and Eustochium followed him, taking a different route, on a joint pilgrimage to Jerusalem. From there, Jerome went on to Egypt, where he visited the Alexandrine scholars as well as the desert dwellings of the monks.
- By 386 he had returned to Palestine, where both he and Paula had decided to settle and devote themselves to a monastic way of life.

- Their goal was not to live the extreme ascetic life but rather a life of moderate austerity, spent mostly in study. Since Paula was rich and Jerome was not lacking in means, they founded two monastic houses in Bethlehem, one for women and another for men.
- Jerome furthered his education in Hebrew, in order to translate the Bible, while he taught Latin to the children of the neighborhood and Greek and Hebrew to Paula's nuns.
- Above all, Jerome devoted himself to the work of translating the Bible into Latin. By this time there were other translations but these had been done on the basis of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. What Jerome was undertaking was a direct translation from Hebrew into Latin.
- Jerome's version, known as the Vulgate, eventually became the standard Bible of the entire Latin-speaking church. At first though the Vulgate was not as well received as Jerome had wished. The new translation, naturally enough, altered the favorite texts of some people, and many demanded to know who had given Jerome the authority to tamper with the Scriptures.
- Furthermore, many believed the legend that the Septuagint had been the work of independent translators who, upon comparing their work, found themselves in total agreement. The legend had been used to argue that the Septuagint was just as inspired as the Hebrew text.
- When Jerome published a version that disagreed with the Septuagint, there were many who felt that he lacked respect for the inspired Word of God.
- Such criticism did not come only from ignorant believers but also from some very learned Christians. From North Africa, Augustine wrote:

**“I pray you not to devote your energies to translating the sacred books to Latin, unless you do as you did earlier in your translation of the book of Job, that is, adding notes that show clearly where your version differs from the Septuagint, whose authority has no equal...Besides, I cannot imagine how, after so long, someone can find in the Hebrew manuscripts anything which so many translators did not see before, especially since they knew Hebrew so well.”<sup>11</sup>**

- At first Jerome did not answer Augustine's letter, nor a second one. Augustine insisted on the matter, writing again and blaming Jerome for scandalizing the faithful.
- As an example of the evils caused by Jerome's translation, he refers to the manner in which Jerome translated the name of the plant that provided shade for Jonah. The traditional version, based on Greek, called it a gourd. Jerome translated it as ivy. Augustine reports:

**“A certain bishop, our brother, ordered that your translation be employed in the church he leads. People were surprised that you translated a passage in Jonah in a very different way than they were used to singing for generations. There was a riot, particularly since the Greeks claimed that the passage was wrong...So you see the consequences of supporting your translation on manuscripts that cannot be verified by known languages [that is, Greek or Latin, rather than Hebrew].”<sup>12</sup>**



- When Jerome finally responded to Augustine's letters, he implied that Augustine was simply a young man seeking to make a name for himself by criticizing his elders.
- In the course of the letter, he proceeded to crush Augustine's arguments, eventually telling him, "you don't even understand what you are asking about," and calling his opponents, apparently Augustine among them, cucurbitarians or "gourdists."
- Although most of Jerome's controversies ended in wounds that never healed, the outcome was different in this case with Augustine.
- Years later, Jerome felt the need to refute the doctrine of Pelagius and to that end he had recourse to study Augustine's works. His next letter to the bishop of North Africa expressed an admiration that he reserved for very few.
- At first glance, Jerome appeared to be an extremely insensitive person whose only concern was his own prestige. But in truth he was very different than he appeared and his rigid façade hid a sensitive spirit.
- No one knew this as well as Paula and Eustochium. Paula died in 404 and Jerome felt alone and desolate.
- A few years later, on August 24<sup>th</sup> 410, Rome was taken and sacked by the Goths under Alaric's command. The news shook the world. Jerome heard of it in Bethlehem and wrote to Eustochium:

**“Who could have believed that Rome, built by the conquest of the world, would fall? That the mother of many nations has turned to her grave?...My eyes are dim by my advanced age...and with the light I have at night I can no longer read Hebrew books, which are difficult even during the day for the smallness of their letters.”<sup>13</sup>**

- Jerome survived for almost 10 more years. They were years of loneliness, pain and controversy. Finally, a few months after the death of Eustochium, who had become a daughter to him, the tired scholar went to his rest.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 221

<sup>2</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 221-222

<sup>3</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 222

<sup>4</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., pages 223-224

<sup>5</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 225

<sup>6</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 225

<sup>7</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 226

<sup>8</sup> The story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 228

<sup>9</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 233

<sup>10</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 233-234

<sup>11</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 237-238

<sup>12</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 238

<sup>13</sup> The story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 239