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The Story of Christianity, Volume 1

Chapters 21 and 22

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Ambrose of Milan

> God ordered all things to be produced so that there would be common food for all, and so that the earth would be the common inheritance of all. Thus, nature has produced a common right, but greed has made it the right of a few.
>
> AMBROSE OF MILAN

The fourth century, so rich in great Christian leaders, produced none whose career was more dramatic than that of Ambrose of Milan.

AN UNEXPECTED ELECTION

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, and he had reason to hope for higher office in the service of the empire. But first he must deal wisely with the potentially explosive situation in Milan. Therefore, he appeared at the church, where tempers were beginning to flare, 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!"

Such an election was not part of Ambrose's plans for his career, and therefore he had recourse to various devices in order to dissuade the people. When that strategy failed, he repeatedly attempted to escape from the city, but was unsuccessful. Finally, when it became clear that the emperor was gratified with the election of his governor, and would be very displeased if Ambrose insisted on his refusal, he agreed to be made bishop of Milan. 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 eight days, and he was consecrated bishop of Milan on December 1, 373.

Ambrose fled in an attempt to avoid being made bishop of Milan.

Although Ambrose had not sought the office of bishop, he felt that it was a responsibility to which he must devote his best efforts. To help him in his administrative chores, he called on his brother, Uranius Satyrus, who was governor of another province. (Their sister Marcellina was also a devout Christian; she led a semi-monastic life in Rome.) 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. His keen mind aided him in this undertaking. People commented on his ability to read without muttering the words, which was rare at the time. Soon he was one of the best theologians in the Western church, although his work consisted mostly of sermons and other expositions of scripture, and in making available to the Latin-speaking West the theology

of the Greek-speaking East. For this he was exceptionally well qualified, for he had been well versed in the Greek language and an admirer of its literature long before he began studying theology. Along these lines, he 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 the manger to bring you to the altar; he was on earth so that you might be in heaven."[28] Ambrose was also very much 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:

The ruins of the ancient baptistery, under the cathedral of Milan, where Ambrose probably baptized Augustine.

> 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 keep the living vessels, than the golden ones.[29]

Likewise, in writing about the duties of pastors Ambrose told them that true strength consists in supporting the weak against the strong, and that they should invite to their feasts not the rich who could reward them but rather the poor who could not.

Among the many who went to listen to him preach, there was a young teacher of rhetoric who had taken a long and tortuous spiritual pilgrimage, and who was so entranced by the bishop's words that he returned to his mother's faith, which he had abandoned many years before. Eventually, the young man, whose name was Augustine, was baptized by Ambrose, who does not seem to have been aware of the exceptional gifts of his convert, who one day would become the most influential theologian of the West since the apostle Paul.

THE BISHOP AND THE THRONE

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. On that point, Ambrose was adamant. He would not have a holy place desecrated by heretical worship, nor would he allow the empress's power to be used to further the Arian cause in Milan. Thus followed a long series of memorable confrontations. At one point, Ambrose and his followers were besieged by imperial troops surrounding a disputed church. While those outside threatened the besieged with the 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 take them.[30]

It was in the midst of such confrontations with imperial power that Ambrose ordered that an ancient burial ground under one of the churches be dug up. There two skeletons were found, probably dating back long before the Christian Era. But someone remembered hearing as a child about two martyrs, Protasius and Gervasius, and immediately the remains were given those names. Soon rumors were circulating about the miracles performed by the "sacred relics," and the people rallied even more closely around their bishop.

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, probably by some who sought his power, Theodosius intervened once again, and thus became sole ruler of the empire.

Theodosius was a Nicene Christian—it was under his auspices that the Council of Constantinople gathered in 381 CE and reaffirmed the decisions of Nicea. But in spite of this, and now for other reasons, he clashed with Ambrose on two separate occasions. Both times he had to yield before the firmness of the bishop, although in all fairness one must say that the first time justice was on Theodosius's side.

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 also must rebuild the synagogue. Ambrose protested that a Christian emperor should not force Christians to build a Jewish synagogue. After several stormy interviews, the emperor yielded, 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 was different, and in it justice was on Ambrose's side.

There had been a riot at Thessalonica, and the commandant of the city had been killed by the rioters. Ambrose, who knew the irascible 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 circus or arena to celebrate the imperial pardon, and slaughtered some seven thousand of them.

Upon learning of these events, Ambrose resolved to demand clear signs 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 hand 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."[31]

At that point, some courtiers threatened violence. But the emperor acknowledged the truth in Ambrose's words, and gave public signs of repentance. He also ordered that from that time on, if he ever decreed that someone be put to death, the execution be delayed for thirty days.

After that clash, relations between Theodosius and Ambrose were increasingly cordial. Finally, when the emperor knew that death was near, he called to his side the only man who had dared to censure him in public.

By then Ambrose's fame was such that Fritigil, the Germanic queen of the Marcomanni, had 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, 397, Easter Sunday.

22
John Chrysostom

> How think you that you obey Christ's commandments, when you spend your time collecting interest, piling up loans, buying slaves like livestock, and merging business with business? . . . And that is not all. Upon all this you heap injustice, taking possession of lands and houses, and multiplying poverty and hunger.
>
> 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." That was a title he 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 Chrysostom the pulpit was not simply a podium from which to deliver brilliant pieces of oratory. It was rather the verbal expression of his entire life, his battlefield against the powers of evil, an unavoidable calling that eventually led to exile and to death itself.

A VOICE FROM THE WILDERNESS

He 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."

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

training for baptism. Three years later, when he completed the time of preparation that was then required, he was baptized by Bishop Meletius of Antioch. Once again his mother rejoiced. But when he told her that he intended to withdraw from the city and follow the monastic way she was adamant, and made him promise that he would never leave her as long as she lived. It may well be that some of these experiences are reflected in his later sermons on topics such as marriage and the family.

His contemporaries described Chrysostom as short, with a wide and furrowed forehead, and deep-set eyes.

John's way of solving the tension between his monastic vocation and his mother's possessiveness was simply to turn their home into a monastery. There he lived with three like-minded friends until, after his mother's death, he joined the monks in the Syrian mountains. He then spent four years learning the discipline of monastic life, and two more rigorously practicing it in complete solitude. Later, he himself 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."[32]

In any case, when John returned to Antioch after his six years of

monastic withdrawal, he was ordained deacon, and then a presbyter shortly thereafter. As such, he began preaching, and soon his fame was widespread throughout the Greek-speaking church.

In 397, the bishopric of Constantinople became vacant, and the emperor ordered that John be taken to the capital city to occupy that prestigious position. But his popularity in Antioch was such that the authorities feared a riot, and therefore kept the imperial decree secret. They simply invited the famous preacher to visit a small chapel on the outskirts of the city, and when he was there they ordered him into a carriage, in which he was forcefully taken to the capital. There he was consecrated 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 had 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, although in fact it was Eutropius who had arranged her marriage to Arcadius. The intrigues that enveloped everything in that city had also had a hand in John's elevation to the patriarchal throne, for Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria had been actively campaigning in favor of a fellow Alexandrine, and John had been given the post through Eutropius's intervention.

The new bishop of Constantinople was not completely aware of all of this. From what we know of his character, it is probable that, had he been aware, he would have acted just as he did. The former monk was still a monk, and could not tolerate the manner in which the rich inhabitants of Constantinople sought to wed the gospel with their own luxuries and comforts.

His first task was to reform the life of 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 for 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 a shambles, and the care of the flock was largely unattended. John took all of those issues head on. He ordered that the "spiritual sisters" move out of the priests' homes, and that the latter lead an austere life. Church finances were placed under a system of detailed scrutiny. The luxury items that adorned the bishop's palace were sold in order to feed the hungry; and the clergy received orders to open the churches

at such times as were convenient not only for the wealthy, but also for those who had to work. Obviously, all these measures gained him both the respect of many and the hatred of others.

But such a reformation could not be limited to the clergy. It was necessary that the laity also be called to lead lives more in accordance with gospel mandates. Therefore, the golden-mouthed 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 passer-by who looks upon your great mansion 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.[33]

RETURN TO THE WILDERNESS

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. Eutropius, who had made him bishop, expected special favors and concessions. But John was convinced that Eutropius was simply another Christian in need of having the gospel clearly and unambiguously preached. The result was that Eutropius repented, not of his sin, but rather of his error in having brought the meddlesome preacher from Antioch.

Finally a storm broke out over the right of asylum. Some fled from the tyranny of Eutropius and took refuge in Hagia Sophia. The chamberlain simply sent soldiers after them. But the bishop proved unbending, and did not allow the soldiers into the sanctuary. Eutropius protested before the emperor, but Chrysostom took his cause to the pulpit and for once Arcadius did not bow before the requests of his favorite. After that, the influence of the chamberlain waned, and many attributed this to his clash with the bishop.

Shortly thereafter, a series of political circumstances precipitated 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 run to Hagia Sophia and embrace the altar. When the mob came after him, Chrysostom stood in its way, and invoked the same right of asylum that he had invoked earlier

against Eutropius. Thus, Chrysostom was led to defend the life of his erstwhile enemy, first against the people, then against the army, and finally against the emperor himself. The crisis came to an end when the former chamberlain, not trusting what seemed the weak defenses of the church, fled from his refuge, and was captured and killed by some of the many he had wronged.

But Chrysostom had made many more enemies among the powerful. Eudoxia, the emperor's wife, resented the bishop's growing power. Besides, what was being said from the pulpit of Hagia Sophia was not to her liking—it fitted her too well. When Chrysostom described the pomp and the folly of the powerful, she felt the people's eyes staring at her. It was necessary to silence that voice from the wilderness that had brought such wild ravings to the elegant Hagia Sophia. With that in mind, the empress made special grants to the church. The bishop thanked her. And continued preaching.

Then the empress had more direct methods of recourse. When Chrysostom had to leave 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, Chrysostom 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, but simply went about his preaching and his management of the church. Theophilus and his partisans found him guilty, and asked Arcadius to banish him. Prodded by Eudoxia, the weak emperor agreed to that request, and ordered Chrysostom to leave the city.

The situation was tense. The people were indignant. The bishops and other clergy from neighboring towns gathered at the capital, and pledged their support to the bishop. All that he had to do was to give the order, and they would convene as a synod that would condemn Theophilus and his followers. This could be coupled with a popular uprising that would shake the very foundations of the empire. 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. But Chrysostom 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 boiling with rumors of mutiny. Arcadius, Eudoxia, and the army did

not dare show themselves in public. That night, in what was taken as a sign of divine wrath, the earth quaked. A few days later, in response to the fearful and urgent pleas of Eudoxia, Chrysostom returned to the city and to his pulpit, where he was received with shouts of acclamation.

Although the bishop had returned, the causes of the conflict were not resolved. After a few months of additional intrigue, confrontation, and humiliation, Chrysostom received a new order of exile. Once again he refused to heed the advice of his friends, and quietly surrendered to the soldiers who came after him, rather than stirring up a riot that would cause the people further suffering.

But the riot was inevitable. Mobs flocked to Hagia Sophia and the surrounding area. The army was ordered to quell the disturbance, and in the ensuing struggle the cathedral and several public buildings nearby caught fire and were destroyed. The cause of the fire was never discovered. But during the inquest many of Chrysostom's supporters were tortured, and his best-known friends were banished—although to areas distant from him.

Meanwhile, the preacher with the golden mouth was lead to exile in the remote village of Cucusus. Since he lacked a pulpit there, he took up the pen, and the world was moved. Innocent, the bishop of Rome, took up Chrysostom's cause, and many followed his example. The emperor's actions were criticized from every quarter; Theophilus of Alexandria had no support but that of a few timid souls who dared not oppose imperial power. As the controversy became widespread, the little town of Cucusus seemed to become the center of the world. Empress Eudoxia had died, and some hoped that Emperor Arcadius would reverse his policy. But he did not, and a number of bishops supported the imperial policy by agreeing to the banishment of the famous preacher. But 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. The latter 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 was then convinced that the cause against John was just, Honorius would break communion with him. But if, on the contrary, the deposition of John was found to be unjust, Arcadius should restore communion with him—and by implication return him to his see in Constantinople. This threatened not only Arcadius's policies, but also that of the important bishops who had come to power by supporting them—including the patriarchs of Alexandria

and of Antioch. Therefore the Latin delegation received what in its report to Innocent it called a "Babylonian treatment"—it is not clear whether on orders from the court in Constantinople, or from John's ecclesiastical rivals, who needed the embassy to fail. The members of the delegation were imprisoned, tortured, offered a bribe of three-thousand gold pieces—which they refused—and sent home in a leaky boat that soon began to sink. In their report to Innocent, they said that the soldiers told them that the captain of the ship had been given orders to see that they did not make it home. But eventually, after changing ships, they did return to Italy. Meanwhile, a number of John's most influential supporters simply disappeared, being secretly exiled to various remote areas and fortresses.

Finally, even Cucusus seemed too near a place of exile, and Chrysostom was ordered removed even farther, to a cold and unknown hamlet on the shores of the Black Sea. The soldiers guarding him, being aware that their charge did not have the good will of the crown, paid no attention to his failing health, and during the journey drove him to exertions well beyond his strength. 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 briefest 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 communion with him—particularly the patriarchs of Alexandria and of Antioch—and the schism ended only when, thirty-one years after his death, John's memory was restored, and his body brought back to Constantinople amid great pomp and celebration.

As we compare the lives of Chrysostom and Ambrose, we see an indication of what would be the future course of the churches in the East compared with the West. Ambrose faced the most powerful emperor of his time, and won. Chrysostom, on the other hand, was deposed and banished by the weak Arcadius. From then on, the Latin-speaking church of the West would become increasingly powerful, as it filled the vacuum left by the crumbling empire. In the Greek-speaking East, on the other hand, the empire would last another thousand years. Sometimes weak, and sometimes strong, this Eastern offshoot of the old Roman Empire—the Byzantine Empire—would zealously guard its prerogatives over the church. Theodosius was not the last Western emperor to be humbled by a Latin-speaking bishop. And

John Chrysostom was not the last Greek-speaking bishop banished by an Eastern emperor.