

Rules

Homily for Saint Ambrose, Bishop and Doctor

Thomas A. Baima

Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, Mundelein, Illinois

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“In the midst of the Church, he opened his mouth, and the Lord filled him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and clothed him with a robe of glory.”¹ That beautiful antiphon, which is a quotation from the Book of Sirach, might well express the prayer of every faithful Catholic when her or his priest enters the pulpit to preach. The people of Christ fervently desire to bestow that “robe of glory” on their preachers. Sadly, too often the preacher does not cooperate with the grace of wisdom and understanding. As you learn from Father Kunkel in theological anthropology, grace becomes effective through human response, which is itself grace directed. Sadly, some human responses stand in the way of grace, and limit its efficacy. This is why priests need to “ponder the law of the Lord day and night, [so that he] will yield fruit in due season.”²

When I was studying in Rome, I was invited to be part of a priest support group by some other priests living at our national college. One of them had a deep devotion to Saint Ambrose and had the custom of making a yearly visit to Milan as part of his retreat. He identified with Ambrose, who like himself, had a career as a civil government official prior to his priesthood. As the first year men will remember from the priesthood class they have with me, Ambrose did his formation backwards, being elected bishop and only then being baptized. This is certainly

¹ “Entrance Antiphon-Memorial of Saint Ambrose, Bishop and Doctor of the Church” in *The Roman Missal*, Third Typical Edition (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011), 1009.

² “Communion Antiphon-Memorial of Saint Ambrose, Bishop and Doctor of the Church,” *Ibid.*

stranger than anything I have ever seen on Admission Boards. Yet, God certainly used him in a powerful way, which is a good lesson to us that what you bring to formation is less important than your cooperation with formation, once it begins.

In many ways, my priest friend from Rome picked an ideal patron. Even if we don't personally identify with the move from civil official to priest, Ambrose has a lot to offer us. As a doctor of the Church, we know that his teaching is a reliable guide, but I would say he is especially suited to our needs as a community engaged in theological study, since he lived at a time of similar cultural and intellectual turmoil.

The liturgy speaks of him as "a teacher of the Catholic faith and a model of apostolic courage." It goes on to beseech God to raise up in the Church "men after [God's] own heart" to serve as priests. Ambrose lived during the Arian controversy in the West. His cultural context was one of a society that was post-Roman, and deeply divided religiously. He responded by living a life which was accessible to each of the elements in society. He was sympathetic to Nicene orthodoxy, yet, well respected by the Arians for his virtue. Because of this virtue, he also enjoyed the respect of pagans, who saw him exemplifying their highest ideals. The Stoic and Ciceronian values so esteemed by pagan culture pointed people towards an appreciation of the Christian virtues Ambrose exhibited. In this way the seeds of the Word present in paganism can be seen as disposing people to recognize virtue in Christianity.

More than a description, what I have just told you about Ambrose is a program for pastoral ministry. You learn in dogmatic theology that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith. If you use it as your hermeneutical guide, you will never read the scriptures in a manner which leads to Arianism or other errors. In the same way, Ambrose spoke of a rule of truth, by which he meant the "general representation of virtue" in a person's

life. If we live a life that is true, then, and only then, can we describe our life as apostolic. It is the truth of our lives which is the one, sure apologetic. Ask yourself what you admire and you will uncover what your life is saying to others. Saint Ambrose described the “general representation of virtue” this way: “do nothing to advance one’s own cause whereby another loses ground, nor to use whatever good one has to disgrace or blame another.”³

The rule of faith gives us our identity and the rule of truth give us our life. These are the rules of faith and mores. The Scriptures, philosophy and natural law all testify to them. The general representation of virtue, is also a plan for parish ministry.

Any notion of priesthood which begins with the priest as a solitary individual misses the mark. Priesthood is inseparable from two communities: the church and the world. This is the real genius of Saint Ambrose as a doctor of the Church. Virtue finds its true existence in the fabric of our interactions with others. All of us, clergy, laity or non-Christian exist in various communities. As a result, this approach of Ambrose can touch people both within and outside the Church. It is an evangelical orientation which fulfills what Bishop Pates called us to yesterday in his homily. It is also, as you well know from your own experience, an approach which can find a hearing among the non-religious members of your generation, because virtue has attractive power.

As we pray today, let us seek to be disciples who profit from the teaching of the Bishop Saint Ambrose and who can hasten fearlessly along the apostolic path guided by the rule of faith and the rule of truth.⁴

³ Matthew Levering, *On Priesthood: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, MA: Sheed and Ward/Roman and Littlefield, 2003), 36.

⁴ “Prayer after Communion-Memorial of Saint Ambrose, Bishop and Doctor of the Church,” *The Roman Missal*, op. cit.