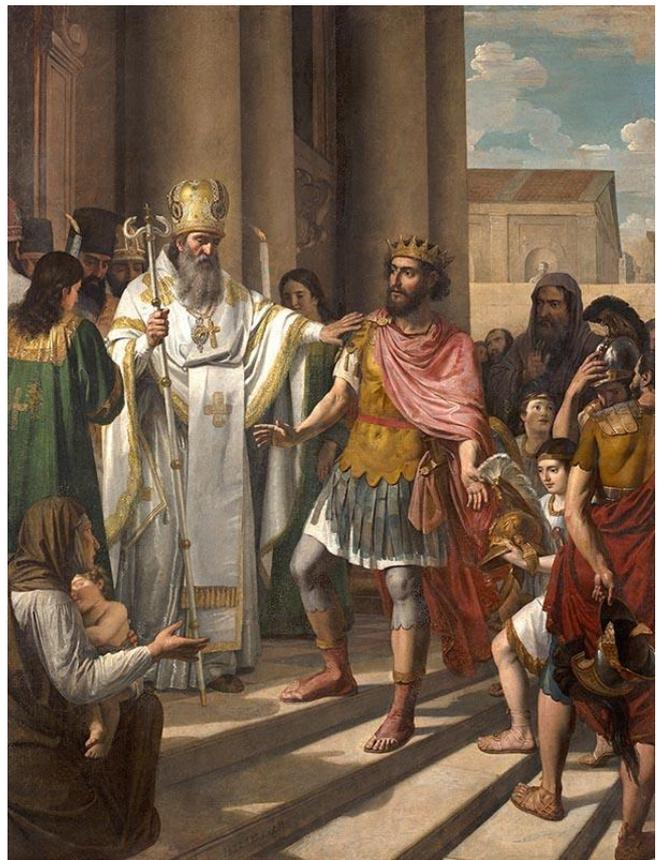


Ambrose of Milan (339-397) 7th December

Ambrose was born into an important Roman family, was trained as a lawyer, and at 31 was Governor of Aemilia/Liguria in Northern Italy. When a disturbance arose around the election of a new Bishop in Milan, the capital, he addressed the crowd, appealing for peace. A chant arose – “Ambrose for Bishop”. At that point he was not a baptized Christian, let alone ordained, yet within a week he was consecrated Bishop (374). He completely changed his lifestyle, giving away his wealth and living simply, and became a strong supporter of his people, as well as a liturgist and writer.

His background stood him in good stead when it came to conflict with authority. In the 380s the young Emperor, an Arian, endeavoured to seize church buildings Ambrose resisted.

In the troubled conditions of the 4th c Milan was invaded by the Gauls, but was retaken by the Eastern Emperor, Theodosius. In 390 a riot in Thessalonica resulted in Theodosius sending in troops, who massacred around 7000 people. Ambrose refused to celebrate the Eucharist in the presence of the Emperor, and sent him a strong letter condemning his actions. What is often represented in art of this event is Ambrose actually barring the door of the church – a dramatization of the situation seen in the paintings by Anthony van Dyck (c 1620) on the left, and Andrei Ivanov's on the right (1829). (The latter has a fascinating history, having been painted for the Russian legation in Peking (Beijing) and lost from view until very recently).



Less popular was the scene of the Emperor's capitulation, here by Barocci (1603)

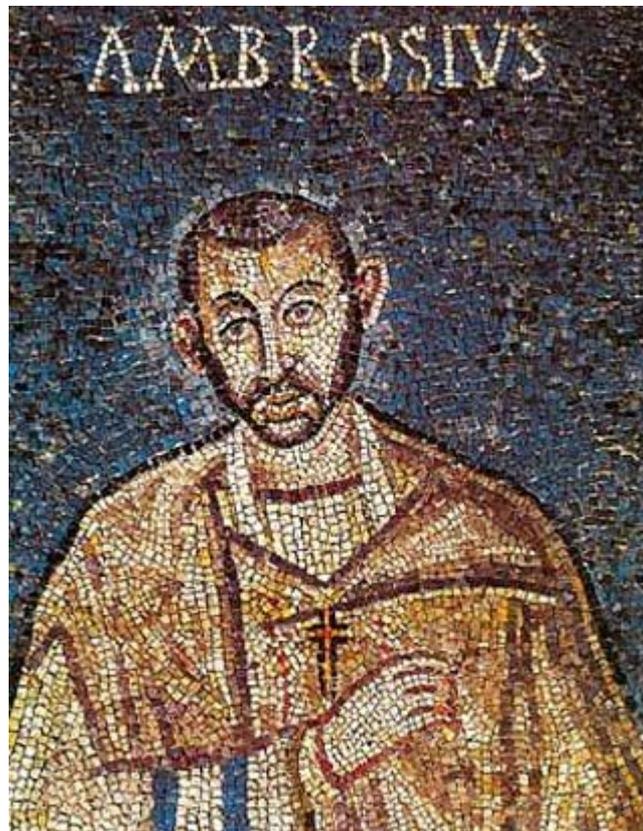


Australian theologian Dr Brian Harris comments on this event

".. in my judgment it is one of those critical turning points in history..."

Today we are outraged when we hear of atrocities and injustice. And rightly so. But from where does that outrage flow? Ambrose vs. Theodosius reminds us that when the Roman Empire embraced Christianity it embarked upon a journey that had never previously been trodden. It was a journey where every life mattered, and where no one was above the law. Holding power was no longer seen as an excuse for abusing power. To the contrary, to hold power was to hold a sacred trust from God, and therefore to be eternally accountable."

Ambrose's body is still displayed in the crypt of the Basilica which he founded in Milan (not to be confused with Milan Cathedral). Like the body, clad in rich vestments, later images, like those above, often represent him in the full panoply of later Bishops. But perhaps we can better glimpse his compassion and strength in the very early (5th c) mosaic



One of the attributes identifying St Ambrose in iconography is a beehive.



Not only does his name refer to "sweet food" (Ambrosia) but he likened Scriptural teaching to the gathering of pollen to bring the honey of divine truth to the people. He is also one of the saints named "honey tongued" both for his eloquent preaching and his promotion of singing, especially singing the Psalms, but also hymns which he composed, an innovation in the Western church of his time.

Richard Baxter (1615 -1691) 8th December

Baxter shares with Ambrose an inspiring reputation as a theologian, and as a hymn writer - one of his compositions which we still sing is *Ye Holy Angels Bright*. He wrote *The liveliest emblem of heaven that I know upon earth is, when the people of God, in the deep sense of his excellency and bounty, from hearts abounding with love and joy, join together both in heart and voice, in the cheerful and melodious singing of his praises.*

Even though he left the Church of England in which he had been ordained to take up a Nonconformist ministry in 1671, he is honoured in both the Anglican and Episcopal churches. "Nonconformist" is a particularly apt designation for someone of independent, deeply thought views, who ended up being abused as a Puritan on one side and a Papist on the other. Astonishingly, he was a chaplain to both Cromwell and to Charles 11, but certainly not because he was a turncoat. His uncompromising stance led to fines, imprisonment for 18 months by the notorious Justice Jeffreys, and general harassment, yet he continued to write and publish – over 250 works. Detractors derided him as "scribbling Dick", yet when Boswell asked Samuel Johnson which of Baxter's works he should read Johnson replied "Read any of them, they are all good".

The three most frequently republished are *The Saints' Everlasting Rest, or, a Treatise of the blessed State of the Saints in their Enjoyment of God in Heaven* (1649); his ministerial manual *The Reformed Pastor* (1656); and *A Call to the Unconverted* (1658). His success as an evangelist led to hundreds of conversions, and he remains a strong influence on much Evangelical writing. Baxter was also an early and passionate critic of slavery, at a time when it was still generally accepted.

Portrait after a painting by Robert White, c 1670
Copyright: © National Portrait Gallery, London

