

Ambrose's Mother and Her Son's Theological Views

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SUMMARY: 1. Ambrose's Family Background; 2. Honour your Father and your Mother; 3. Mother and Widow; Mary Mother of Jesus; Conclusion.

St Ambrose was elected bishop of Milan on Dec 7, 374. For 23 years, he led his Church as a pastor, he preached, he negotiated with Emperors, he struggled for the Nicene faith. But before, he rose up in a Christian family where he received his first religious instruction, mostly from his mother, as his father disappears from his life quite early. This experience of the motherhood most likely shaped his views on women, mothers, and widows. Last year, L. F. Pizzolato published his new research the family background of Ambrose, where he tried to solve what he calls “the enigma of Ambrose's father”.¹ This excellent paper raised for me a question: is there some connection between Ambrose's family experience and some topics of his theological thought? I shall propose this sketch that should be seen only as an introduction to a further research that still has to be conveyed.

1. Ambrose's Family Background

The Roman writers used to be very reluctant to express themselves in their official writings on their family background. This is true es-

1 See Pizzolato, *Luigi Franco: L'enigma del padre di sant'Ambrogio*. *Aevum* 88, no. 1 (2014): 137–166.

pecially when they speak about their mothers. This was due to some kind of restraint and to some aristocratic decorum. Ambrose rose up as a member of a very important Roman aristocratic family, and he is silent about his family in his writings, including letters to his sister Marcellina, the treatises on virginity and widowhood, and even in his funeral speech in honour of his brother Satyrus. Unlike Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, or Augustine, Ambrose does not speak about his mother at all.² At first sight, there seems to be no hope to recover an image of Ambrose's mother, or even to follow the traits of his mother in his theological writings.

What is more, Ambrose's biographer, deacon Paulinus of Milan in his *Vita Ambrosii*, reduces the role of Ambrose's family to the minimum. Ambrose's father appears only in the introductory scene with the auspicious bee swarm entering infant Ambrose's mouth to mark his future eloquence where his father predicts the glorious future of his son.³ Though, we can understand the whole scene only a literary means to underline Ambrose's preaching abilities. The only other Paulinus' remark regards Ambrose's mother who is said to be a widow.⁴

Pizzolato shows in a very convincing way that this silence regarding Ambrose's family is voluntary both from Ambrose himself, from his biographer, and sister Marcellina who was most likely Paulinus' source. The reason for this seems to be the political fate of Ambrose's father Ambrosius Marcellinus. He was part of the public administration: at the time of Ambrose's birth in 339/40, he was the prefect of the Gauls.⁵ After the death of Constantine II in 340, when he was

2 See Savon, *Hervé: Saint Ambroise et les femmes*. in Delage, Pascal (ed.): *Les Pères de l'Église et les femmes: actes du colloque de La Rochelle, 6 et 7 septembre 2003*. Jonzac: Histoire et Culture, 2003, p. 263.

3 See Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 3.2-4.

4 See Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 4.1.

5 See Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 5.1; *Acta Sanctorum*, Iulii IV 4.11: 235-36; Pizzolato, "L'enigma": 147.

defeated by Constans, Ambrose's father returned to the administration and moved to Rome: in 350 he became *Praefectus Urbi*. Then he joined Magnentius when he was acclaimed as Augustus in 350 and he shared the usurper's ill fate when defeated at Mursa in 351: Ambrose's father was not even buried.⁶

Notwithstanding this reticence about Ambrose's family and his mother, Pizzolato's studies rose my interest in the question if Ambrose's upbringing left some traces of his mother or his idea of a perfect motherhood and widowhood in his theological works. It is clear that we move at the moment on the level of a hypothesis, a hypothesis very unlikely to be ascertained ever.

Ambrose's family was a Christian one: among his ancestors, Soteris was martyred under Diocletian in 304. The family made part of both the civic and ecclesiastical milieu. During the episcopate of Julius (337-52), Ambrosius Marcellinus was—as it has been mentioned already—the *Praefectus Urbi* in 350. From 340 to 342 the exiled Athanasius was hosted in Rome by Julius. Julius' promotion of the consecrated life had a strong influence on Ambrose's family: his sister Marcellina received her veil from Pope Liberius most probably on Christmas 353.⁷ Before Ambrose left for Sirmium in 365 to pursue his career in public administration that would lead him to the famous episcopal election in Milan in 374, he was engaged in Christian life in Rome and in the discussions with the Jews. Chiara Somenzi has come with a very convincing theory that the author of the Latin translation of Josephus' *Jewish War* is in fact a young Ambrose.⁸ Although Ambrose was baptised only before being consecrated a bishop, he was raised as a Christian in a family loyal to the Nicene Creed and his knowledge of Christian doctrine and theology was not trivial.

6 This might explain Ambrose's attention to Christian duty to bury the dead: see Pizzolato, "L'enigma": 159.

7 See *De virginibus* III.1.1ff.

8 See Somenzi, *Chiara*: Egesippo Ambrogio. Milano: Vita e Pensiero 2009, p. 184.

Ambrose's mother and sister played undoubtedly a crucial role in his education.

2. Honour your Father and your Mother

Although father and mother do not appear in Ambrose's writings, there are still texts where it is very difficult not to imagine the bishop's own parents. One of these texts is a homily given on the anniversary of Ambrose's episcopal consecration in 385, which we find in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* where he comments on Luke 18:20:

*"Honour your father and your mother. It makes me happy that we should read the beginning of the Law on this anniversary day of my episcopal ordination."*⁹

Ambrose's talk is motivated by a very concrete complaint of a mother that her child chose to bring money as a donation to the Church but left his own mother hungry.¹⁰ His exhortation to live accordingly to the fourth commandment bears traces of a personal attitude towards his own parents. Ambrose does not spend time on speaking about his father, but there are words about the honour towards mother that disclose Ambrose's affection towards his own mother. This description is, in fact, introduced by the insertion of 1Tim 5:3 *"Honour widows who are genuinely widows"*: a quotation that would fit to the life situation of his mother after her husband's unfortunate and unburied death:

"Nourish and support your father, nourish and support your mother. But even in nourishing your mother you will never repay her for the pangs she suffered, you will never repay her for the torment she endured, in giving you birth. You will never repay her for the care and attention she lavished on you; you will never repay her for the milk with which she

9 Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 8.73.

10 See Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 8.76-79.

fed you when, with love beyond all telling, she held her breasts to your lips. You cannot repay her for the hunger she suffered on your account, eating nothing that might be harmful to you. She fasted, so that you might eat; for your sake she gave up things that she could have enjoyed; for your sake she ate things that she would have preferred not to eat. For your sake she kept awake at night; on your account she wept. [...] You owe her all you have.”¹¹

Here, we should bear in mind that the delivery and birth were always a matter of life and death. Mothers giving birth were always risking their lives, and many of them really did die during their labour. Any illness was a great danger for their children too; a very high percentage of children died before the age of 15. Data seem to suggest that infant mortality rate in the Roman Empire could have been as high as 300 per 1000 births and life expectancy at birth of 25.¹² Taking into account today's mothers' anxieties, attentiveness and care regarding their children even in the case of milder sickness which does not threaten their lives, we should consider how much greater the anxieties of mothers in the Antiquity must have been if any illness or even attack of weakness might bring their beloved offspring to the tomb, notwithstanding all the love and care they might have devoted to them? In this context, it is not possible to view Ambrose's words as too affected or exaggerated. I consider them quite realistic. To document this, Ambrose employs similar language in his commentary on Luke 2:51 “*He—Jesus—came to Nazareth and was subject to them*” (i.e. to his parents):

“But you, my friend, only think what you cost your mother! You cost her the loss of her bodily integrity, the sacrifice of her virginity, the perils of labour, the long and weary waiting. Think of the dangers your moth-

11 *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 8.75.

12 See *Todman, Donald*: Childbirth in ancient Rome: From traditional folklore to obstetrics. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 47 (2007): 84.

er was in, in giving you birth. Poor woman, in bringing forth the fruit she so much wished for, still greater peril awaits her. In giving birth she is delivered of her child, but not of her fears.”¹³

Here, the honouring of the parents is connected to the image of God: “the Father underwent no labour in generating his Son” and the Son, honouring his Father, gives “an example of filial love and obedience”.¹⁴ The double honour of Christ towards his heavenly Father and towards his earthly parents points then, in fact, to the double nature in Christ. The argumentation here is directed primarily against the Arians, but the affectionate description of a mother’s sacrifice for her child bears traces of a personal experience and personal honour towards Ambrose’s mother.

3. Mother and Widow

Ambrose speaks frequently about mothers, their way of life, and duties of children towards them. In the family, mother is characterised by her *affectus*, or tenderness, where the father is an “authority” who proffers the “judgment” (*iudicium*). Her role regards especially the younger children, father takes care of the older ones.¹⁵ However, much more attention than to the motherhood, Ambrose gives to the other states of Christian life, among them to the widows. There is a reason for that: Paulinus of Milan says that Ambrose’s mother was a widow in 353/4. Ambrose’s mother’s way of life corresponded to the life of a consecrated widow.¹⁶ In his *Exhortation to Virginity*, written in the later stage of Ambrose’s life, Ambrose praises a widow called Juliana who had built a basilica in Bologna, who was a mother of a priest

13 *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 2.66.

14 *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 2.66.

15 See Ambrose, *De Iacob et vita beata* 2.2.7.

16 See Paulinus, *Vita* 4.1.

and of a virgin.¹⁷ Similar was the case of Ambrose's own mother, a widow, a mother to a priest/bishop and a consecrated virgin, Marcelina. On the lips of Juliana, Ambrose puts the following words:

“I have experimented, my children, the labours of conjugal union, what's low in the matrimony, and under a good spouse. Although I was subjected to a good husband, I have not been free. [...] He has been taken from me and from you. [...] Children, you see me without any help or ornament. I do not have a help of my husband, nor the beauty of the virginity. [...] The burdens of matrimony has been left to me, its advantages are gone.”¹⁸

Although this cannot be proofed with a certainty, we can easily imagine that when Ambrose treats widows, there are traces of his own family experience. Ambrose gives to the widows much attention, more than other Church Fathers, addressing to the widows one of his treatises, *De viduis*, composed in the first years of his episcopal ministry.

It is worth mentioning, how often Ambrose quotes 1Tim 5:3 saying that the widows should be honoured. He follows the reading of Paul when he states that a widow should care about the things of the Lord, that she should be blameless and virtuous to find the privilege to be honoured even by bishops.¹⁹ One would see here Timothy described as a bishop, but let us not forget the role that Ambrose's family played in relation to the bishops of Rome after Ambrose's father's death. Even further description of a widow does not permit not to think about Ambrose's own experience: she should take care of her household,²⁰ she dwells in the temple and spends her time in prayer, talking to the Lord and fasting.²¹ Her chastity is an “active” one, caring not to

17 See Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis* 2.10.

18 *Exhortatio virginitatis* 4.24-26.

19 See Ambrose, *De viduis* 2.8.

20 See *De viduis* 2.7.

21 See *De viduis* 4.23.

“violate the bed of the deceased spouse”²² and the widow transforms her grief into a “good safeguard of modesty”.²³

But this would not be enough just to report on the image of the widows and the requirements for their behaviour that can be found in Ambrose’s writings. It is very significant that for Ambrose a widow becomes one of the images of the Church. In his *De viduis*, he wishes to make known that God takes care of the widows and he brings forward the widow of Sareptah in 1Kgs 17:9-16. As it is his custom, he does not limit himself to the moral sense of the biblical text, but he goes beyond to show the mystical meaning of the sacred text, speaking of Christ and the Church.

“It is not without a precise meaning that among all the widows, only one has been chosen. Who is she, when a prophet so great to be raptured in the heaven is sent, particularly in a time when the heaven remained closed for three years and six months and there was a great famine on the earth? Everywhere there was destitution and still, this widow did not lack anything.”²⁴

The widow is the “typus” of the Church who is seen as a “widow” of the crucified Christ:

“And blessed is the widow to whom the following benediction is addressed: *You will not remember of your dishonour and of your widowhood, for I am the Lord who makes you* (Isa 54:4). And perhaps for this she is a widow who lost her husband, according to the bodily suffering, but in the day of judgment you will receive the Son of man whom you seem to have lost.”²⁵

The Church is “virgin, bride and widow”²⁶ and in her, all Chris-

22 See *De viduis* 5.31.

23 See *De viduis* 8.51.

24 *De viduis* 3.14.

25 *De viduis* 3.15; see *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 4.50.

26 *De viduis* 3.16.

tian states of live find their place. The widowhood of the Church points out to the “time of the Church” between the crucifixion and the second coming of the Lord, when Church lives her fidelity to Christ-Bridegroom in faith: on one hand she conserves her faith in Christ and her fidelity in him, on the second, it is Christ’s faith or trust (*fides*) that she earns with her faith/fidelity (*fides*). Ambrose develops this vision of Church as “a widowed mother” of the believers:

“And if your sins are so heinous that not even your tears can wash them away, then let Mother Church weep for you. She cries out for each of her children, just as a widowed mother would do for her only son. Her heart fills with compassion, she is overcome with a kind of spiritual sorrow that is part of her nature, when she sees her children driven to their death by deadly vices.”²⁷

This tender image of a widowed mother weeping for her children, applied to the Church, is quite unique up to Ambrose’s age, as much as I know. Perhaps even this focus of Church as a widow can be traced to Ambrose’s strong relationship with his mother that was a widow too.

4. Mary Mother of Jesus

In this little exposition on Ambrose and mother, we cannot miss one person: Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Ambrose’s Mariology is very abundant and the bishop of Milan is one of the most Marian of the Fathers. I will mention briefly the episode of Jesus on the cross consigning his mother to the beloved disciple (John 19:26-27).

Contrarily to Ambrose’s stress on widowhood and contrarily to the much general belief that Joseph was already dead at the time of Jesus’ death, he does not consider Mary a widow at the time of Jesus’ death on the cross. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, he discusses

²⁷ *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 5,92.

how it were possible that Mary could leave Joseph for John, and concludes that there could not be any conjugal union between Mary and Joseph, “nor would that just man allowed her to depart”.²⁸

But it is very particular for Ambrose to contemplate Christ on the Cross thinking about his Mother. Both Christ and his mother remain a model:

“Mary, too, was fully equal to her part as Mother of Christ. The apostles fled, but Mary stood at the Cross, and with loving eyes gazed upon the wounds of her Son; for what she foresaw was not her Child’s death but the world’s redemption. [...] This text indeed teaches us what model we should take for motherly love, what pattern we should follow in showing respect to parents. Parents should offer their lives when their children are in danger; children should be more concerned that they leave their mother desolate than that they themselves must die.”²⁹

Ambrose’s discourse on the motherhood is not only moral, but it is rooted in the mystery of Christ. In the moment Christ “makes His last will and testament on the Cross”, he thinks about her mother: in a way he is making out of the moral obligation to honour one’s mother part of the Christian discipleship.³⁰

But this episode is again explained in the ecclesiological manner: Mary is the type of the Church, of the “younger people called from the Gentiles”. Ambrose reads in the episode the fact that Mary is connected very strongly to the Church founded at the Cross and explains why, in fact, Mary is the image of the Church. Obviously, he follows here an Origenian way of the biblical exegesis:

“Mary, or the Church, was formerly united in appearance but not in effect, to the ancient people. Then, giving birth to the Word and having

28 *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 2.4; see also *De institutione virginis* 7.47; *Epistula* 71.4-5.

29 *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 10.132.

30 See *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 10.131; *Epistula* extra coll. 14.109.

sown Him in the heart of humankind—by faith in the Cross and in the burial of the Lord's body—she has, at the command of God, chosen to join herself to the younger people [scil. to the Church].”³¹

What is more, in the beloved disciple, every “Son of the Church” is present under the cross, to everyone the words of Christ are addressed:

“To you too Christ will say from his Cross: ‘*Look, this is your mother,*’ and to the Church he will say: ‘*Look, this is your son*’ (John 19:26). When you have contemplated Christ triumphant on the Cross, then you will begin to be a son of the Church. [...] The true child of the Church is one who recognises in the Cross a great triumph, and hears in Christ's voice the ring of triumph.”³²

It is noteworthy that the spiritual motherhood of the Church is so firmly connected to the saving power of the crucified Christ. We can observe that there exists a “nexus mysteriorum” between Christology, ecclesiology and Mariology in Ambrose that finds various expressions, let us mention briefly the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church, where the new believers are born and where they grow until they reach the perfection in Christ.

Conclusion

We have seen that Ambrose connects the topics of motherhood and widowhood with theological topics. There are Christology of the two natures in Christ, and ecclesiology of Church as a widowed mother. We should not forget, that Ambrose's idea of a perfect Christian conduct of various life styles was formed in his family and his mother had influenced this moral understanding of the Gospel. I find really interesting the widow typology of the Church. These examples

³¹ *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 10.134.

³² *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 7.5.

that I propose are not exhaustive at all. It is clear that we might and should look deeper into Ambrose's ecclesiology and especially Mariology where we would be able to find more links between the bishop's personal experience and his theological views. There are examples of widows, especially of Deborah or of the prophet Anna in the Jerusalem temple, that would bring even more light. I wanted to highlight how Ambrose is attentive to the figure of mother and of widow. This would eventually show that in the studies of Ambrose, of his theology and biblical exegesis, we should not forget that his concept of motherhood and widowhood was not only a theoretical one, but that he was a son of a widow mother and this son's experience formed his views both on Christian manner of life of mothers and of widows and on the mystery of Christ.