

December 13, 2020: Third Sunday of Advent

As I am writing this, it is December 7th, the feast day of one of my favorite saints, Saint Ambrose. Saint Ambrose lived in the fourth century and has an interesting story. He was born into a wealthy and influential family in the Roman Empire. He served in many different posts in the government and, in time, was named governor of Milan. This position was one of the most important in the Empire, and Ambrose was considered an excellent governor. While he was governor, the bishop of Milan who was a heretic died. Ambrose was acclaimed by the whole community and called to become the next bishop, but he immediately shrunk from the call. He did everything he could to avoid becoming the next bishop. He even wrote to the Emperor to explain that he was just a catechumen, not yet even baptized, and so it was inappropriate for him to be elected a bishop. The emperor disagreed with him and insisted he get baptized and be ordained bishop of Milan. At the command of the emperor, Ambrose acquiesced and shortly after was baptized and then ordained a bishop.

Ambrose recognized that he was not well prepared to act as a bishop based on his lack of theological training. The first thing he did was to begin working with a priest who was well versed in scriptures and Church teaching. He also reached out to the leading bishops of the Church to ask for their input on important questions he had. The humility that Ambrose showed in accepting that he had a lot to learn was fortuitous for the Church because he was what you would call a quick study. The powerful thing about Ambrose was not simply his intellectual prowess in understanding the theology of the Church but, rather, his pastoral application of that teaching. He could take a very complex teaching and present it at a level that anyone could understand. Even today his writings still impact the teachings of the Church: they are some of the most beautiful explanations that we have of our faith. However, as important as Ambrose's writings are and how he governed as a bishop, they take a back to seat to one very notable incident in his life.

One day when Ambrose was preaching at the cathedral in Milan, a twenty-eight-year-old man was in the congregation listening to him. This man was looking for answers to life's most difficult issues. He had been wrestling for years to discover the truth. He believed that the Catholic Church and its teachings were far too simplistic and therefore could not hold any real value. For a while he belonged to a religious group called Manicheans, but over time became disillusioned with their teaching on the most important concerns he struggled with. Even though he felt that the Church's teaching was somewhat sophomoric, he was intrigued with what he had heard about Ambrose. Ambrose's preaching was described as brilliant and of a quality that was both sublime and accessible to all. This man was intrigued to hear what Ambrose had to say, but at the same time he was certain it would not alter his beliefs about the Catholic Church. He was wrong!

When he listened to Ambrose, he felt compelled to rethink his whole understanding of what the Church taught. In doing so, he began a journey of conversion that would lead him to be baptized three years later. This person was Saint Augustine who would become one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever produced.

The impact that Ambrose had on Augustine cannot be understated. And that impact came ultimately by his willingness to accept God's calling in his life and to strive to live out that calling to the best of his ability. Ambrose strove in all he did to lead others to Christ and to stand for the truth of the Church no matter what it cost him. He had the conviction that as a Christian—not *only* as a bishop but as a Christian—he had a responsibility to do all he could to continue Christ's mission in the world. And, in doing so, he gave to the Church one of the greatest gifts possible—the conversion of Saint Augustine.

All of us are called to make use of our gifts in furthering the mission of Christ; it is, honestly, how we can best prepare for the coming of Christ. Like Ambrose, we might not even realize who is paying attention to us. Ambrose had no idea that Augustine was in the congregation listening to him. He had no idea that Augustine was lost and searching for answers. He had no idea that Augustine was listening particularly to him, in the hope of finding some answers in his long search for the truth. Ambrose simply stayed true to his goal—to serve Christ at all times in all the ways that he could.

We must seek to do the same in our own lives. We must realize that we have the truth in Jesus. We must realize that we all have gifts we can use to express that truth and we are responsible to do just that. No, we are not all called to do it as Saint Ambrose did. But we must realize that as we seek to live out our faith, we might not be aware of who is paying attention to what we say and what we do, and the impact we might have on others.

Can you think of a greater gift you could give to another than the gift of faith? Let us all seek to be a Saint Ambrose in the lives of others.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in red ink, appearing to read "Fr. Brian". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Fr. Brian