Ambrose of Milan, Letter LXI.1, 4-6

Ambrose praises Theodosius's piety as God's chosen custodian of the empire after the usurper Eugenius has been defeated

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Commentary: For an introduction to Ambrose and his Letters, please see the commentary on Letter XXI.

In order to understand the context of the present letter from Ambrose to the emperor Theodosius, in which he praises the emperor's restoration of peace to the empire and the Church, some contextual information is necessary regarding the political environment in which it was composed, and the events preceding this. In 380 CE, the emperor Gratian (reigned 359-383 CE) sent the Frankish general Arbogast, who held the rank of magister equitum (master of the cavalry), to assist the emperor in the East of the empire, Theodosius, against the Goths in Thrace. Arbogast stayed in Theodosius's service, and in 388 CE proceeded to take back Gaul for the Western emperor Valentinian II, which was held by the defeated usurper Magnus Maximus's son, Flavius Victor. By 391 CE Arbogast enjoyed power in Gaul as comes (count) and regent, and did not take kindly to Valentinian's attempts to relieve him of his position. When Valentinian died in Vienne in the Spring of 392 CE (somewhat suspiciously), Arbogast proclaimed a professor of rhetoric, Flavius Eugenius, as the emperor in the West. Eugenius was the more logical choice for emperor than Arbogast taking this position himself, as Eugenius was a Roman, and therefore much more suitable and likely to win the favour of the senate than a Frank.

Despite reportedly being a Christian himself, Eugenius allowed himself to be steered by his advisors into restoring pagan temples with public money (see Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell, Theodosius, p. 131-133), which made him unpopular with Theodosius, and particularly with Ambrose, who left his see in Milan when the imperial court of Eugenius arrived there. In Letter LVII, which is addressed to Eugenius, Ambrose chastises the emperor for giving in too easily to those pressuring him to reinstate pagan temples, particularly the Altar of Victory in the Senate house. Indeed, Ambrose includes in his letter collection an epistle addressed to Valentinian advising of the inappropriateness of a Christian emperor agreeing to support paganism (Letter XVII), and both the speech by the pagan writer Symmachus pleading with the emperor Valentinus to reinstate the altar, and Ambrose's own step by step refutation of Symmachus's argument (Letter XVIII). Ambrose argues that Eugenius, an emperor professing to be a Christian ought to have upheld God’s law above all else; although imperial power is great, that of God is greater (see Letter LVII.7). In 393-394 CE Arbogast embarked on a successful campaign on the Rhine against the Ripuarian Franks, but Theodosius soon marched west to attempt to quash him, and was successful. Arbogast subsequently committed suicide, and the rhetorician Eugenius was defeated in the famous battle of Frigidus in 394 CE (for an overview, see Alan Cameron, The Last Pagans, chapter 3). The present letter is a reply to a letter Ambrose received from Theodosius upon returning to Milan having fled when Eugenius’s court was there, asking the bishop to perform a public thanksgiving for his victory over the usurper. Ambrose explains his absence from Milan, and states that now that the “unworthy usurper” is no longer in power, he can return. He implores Theodosius to be merciful to the conquered, and praises him for his great piety and clemency (on this particular plea for mercy towards Eugenius’s former supporters, see also Letter LXII).

Ambrose is keen to reassure Theodosius that despite his absence from Milan, the emperor’s good conduct had not been lost on him. This virtue and piety, Ambrose claims, which the emperor maintains despite his great dominion, is precisely what will be rewarded by God. Sections 4 and 5 of the present letter describe how Ambrose took a letter of thanks to God from the emperor and demonstrated the imperial thanks for the victory over the usurpers by placing it on the altar and holding it in his hand while performing the Eucharist. In this way, Ambrose
presents the events essentially as a victory for Christianity over paganism (see Michele Salzmann, “Ambrose and the Usurpation,” p. 207; on this public act of imperial thanksgiving see also Michael McCormick, Eternal Victory, p. 107-108). While other emperors had built triumphal arches to commemorate their victory, Ambrose praises Theodosius for instead expressing his success through gratitude to God, from whom it ultimately came. In a similar vein, Eusebius describes Constantine’s entry into Rome after his defeat of Maxentius as the glorious moment at which the emperor played down his own achievements, and recognised God’s role in his triumph (see Life of Constantine I.39).

The emperor’s clemency is greatly emphasised, and Giacomo Raspanti argues that for Ambrose, this was of essential importance in making him the ideal ruler, and it was this particular virtue which gave rise to his political policies. This forms the basis of the bishop’s oration to the emperor’s memory after his death, On the Death of Theodosius, which Raspanti argues is modelled after Seneca’s On Clemency (“Clementissimus Imperator,” p. 45). This text is interesting in connection with the sentiment of the present extract from Letter LXI, as it illustrates the way in which Ambrose conceived of the emperor’s power in terms of his relationship with God. In relation to the events surrounding our letter, chapter 4 of On the Death of Theodosius connects the emperor’s clemency and indulgence (indulgentia) with his treatment of Eugenius’s supporters, to whom he had granted amnesty (“Clementissimus Imperator,” p. 46). As Raspanti argues, Ambrose understands Theodosius’s Christianity as affording him the ability to rise above the temptations towards arrogance and tyranny which naturally accompany power, and the desire to correct, rather than punish the natural human weakness of his subjects. This method of “paternalistic reproach” is hinted at in our letter, with the emperor presented as humble despite his great power, and as having great pity for his people (“Clementissimus Imperator,” p. 46-47, quotation at p. 47; Raspanti points to chapters 13-14, and 16 of the oration). The oration goes on in chapter 39-40 to condemn Eugenius, along with Maximus, for failing to uphold “the cardinal virtues of Roman culture and society, fides, piietas, and clementia,” and sees Theodosius as instead inheriting the legacy of Christian faith from the archetypal good ruler, Constantine (“Clementissimus Imperator,” p. 48).

The degree to which religion actually played a central role in the events involving the usurpation by Arbogast and Eugenius, and the ensuing battle between them and Theodosius in the battle of Frigidus (394 CE) has been questioned by Michele Salzmann, who argues that contrary to the traditional scholarly view, it was not a strict conflict between pagans and Christians (for many years the fourth century has been understood as characterised either by pagan-Christian conflict, or by accommodation and assimilation; for the bibliography, see Salzmann, “Ambrose and the Usurpation,” p. 192 n. 2). Instead, Salzmann suggests that Arbogast and Eugenius were pursuing new alliances with senators and other prominent Romans, some of whom wanted money for traditional pagan cults. In order to forge these alliances, the usurpers met these demands, and Ambrose—whose interpretation of events was later followed by other writers such as Augustine, Paulinus of Nola, and Rufinus—utilised their actions for his own political gain, by advertising his religious opposition to the usurpers in order to firmly assure his loyalty to Theodosius (“Ambrose and the Usurpation,” p. 193-195). Ambrose’s narrative, part of which we see in the present extract, has been hugely influential in shaping our understanding of the relationship between Christianity and the Roman state during the fourth century, and for that reason, it is important to keep in mind the bishop’s intentions. What is presented in the above extract is a two-way relationship wherein the emperor’s piety and humility, which Ambrose notes surpass that of other emperors and even priests, are rewarded with God’s favourableness to the Roman empire. The empire itself, nonetheless, is something which God wishes to protect – he has chosen Theodosius, “a prince and father of princes,” as custodian, and Ambrose presents the pious nature of the emperor and God’s divine aid working in harmony to liberate Rome from the clutches of the “barbarian robber” (the Frank Arbogast) and the “unworthy usurper” (Eugenius). What was essential for Ambrose was to make clear “imperial victory as proof of the power of the faithful orthodox emperor” (Salzmann, “Ambrose and the Usurpation,” p. 195). It is for this reason that Ambrose has been remembered as creating what is often termed as a ‘theology of imperial victory.’ This ideology in itself is very characteristically Roman. The Romans argued that their victory in battle was very strongly connected to their exceptional piietas (see, for example, Cicero, On the Reply of the Haruspices 19), and so in this sense Ambrose is merely shifting the piety of the emperor to what he perceives to be the right divinity. It is also worth noting, however, that we have precedent for the connection between victory and piety within the Jewish and Christian tradition in the Hebrew Bible, where pious kings benefit from God’s support, and the Jewish people are saved because of this (for instance, see the pious Hezekiah’s string of victories in 2 Kings 18:3-12).

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Thematic keywords in English:

- altar
- barbarians
- clemency
- divine favour
- divine providence
- letter
- priest
- prince
- Roman emperor
- Roman power
- sacrifice
- Theodosius I
- triumph
- triumphal arch
- usurper
- virtue

Other sources connected with this document: Text

**Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine I.39***

Constantine’s triumphal entry into Rome

- [Read more about Eusebius of Caesarea, Life of Constantine I.39](http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/ambrose-milan-letter-lxi1-4-6)

Text

**Cicero, *On the reply of the haruspices 19***

On the superiority of the Romans because of their religious beliefs and their *pietas*.

- [Read more about Cicero, On the reply of the haruspices 19](http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/ambrose-milan-letter-lxi1-4-6)

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