



[Ambrose of Milan, Letter LXII.4](#)

Ambrose implores Theodosius to have mercy on the defeated followers of the usurper, Eugenius

Name of the author: Ambrose of Milan

Date: 394 CE

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: Letter LXII.4

Reference:

LXII.4

Commentary:

For an introduction to Ambrose and his *Letters*, please see the commentary on [Letter XXI](#).

This letter, along with [Letter LXI](#) was written in the aftermath of Theodosius's defeat of the usurper emperor Eugenius, put in place by the Frankish general Arbogast, who held the rank of *magister equitum* (master of the cavalry) and was sent in 380 CE by the emperor of the West, Gratian, to assist Theodosius in the East of the empire against the Goths in Thrace. Arbogast remained in Theodosius's service for several years, but eventually sought more power for himself, and came to blows with Theodosius, who quashed him, and quickly after defeated the usurper Eugenius at the battle of Frigidus in 394 CE (For a very brief summary of the events leading up to and surrounding the battle, please see the commentary on [Letter LXI](#); for more details, see Part III of Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell, *Theodosius*, and Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans*, chapter 3). While this confrontation between Theodosius and the usurpers has long been viewed in scholarship as a clash between Christianity and paganism, owing to the fact that Arbogast and Eugenius financially aided the restoration of certain pagan cults, it has been argued more recently that this interpretation of events is largely down to Ambrose's representation, and the influence that he had on later Christian authors. Michele Salzman argues that Ambrose presented the events as a victory for Christianity under the pious, divinely chosen Theodosius over the impious pagan usurpers for his own political gains, and formulates a 'theology of imperial victory' whereby God has aided the faithful guardian of the empire and upholder of orthodox Christianity (see Michele Salzman, "Ambrose and the Usurpation").

Ambrose begins this epistle by apologising to the emperor for having not written sooner, and explains that he now sends a letter via a deacon known as Felix (see sections 1-3, not quoted above, but viewable at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/340962.htm>). The purpose of the letter is to request Theodosius's forgiveness for certain supporters of the usurper, Eugenius, who had recently been defeated by the emperor. These followers had sought the protection of the Church after Eugenius's death (see section 3), and while Ambrose acknowledges that his request is quite a great one, he appeals to the fact that Theodosius's victory is owing to divine favour. For this reason, the emperor ought to repay God's grace by displaying clemency towards those who ask for it. Ambrose states that he already has good evidence for the emperor's clemency and piety. Indeed, [Letter LXI](#) explains that the emperor had given Ambrose a letter of gratitude to God for granting him victory at the battle of Frigidus, which was to be placed on the altar in Ambrose's church. This offers an interesting example of imperial recognition of divine aid and, for Ambrose, proves the emperor's piety in a concrete form. In this previous epistle Ambrose had already asked the emperor to be merciful towards the supporters of the conquered Eugenius, arguing that his victory was entirely due to God's assistance, and as such the emperor ought to recognise this with acts of piety and Christian forgiveness. The theme of clemency is also one of the key elements in the bishop's oration to the emperor's memory after his death, *On the Death of Theodosius*, and is one of the central qualities which Ambrose views as making Theodosius a worthy ruler.

In his *City of God* V.26, Augustine claims that Theodosius pardoned the sons of his enemies who had taken refuge in church after their fathers were slain, and took advantage of the situation in order to convert them to Christianity. Rather than harshly punishing them by confiscating their property, Augustine relates that the emperor treated them with love, and allowed them to retain what belonged to them. Moreover, this forgiving stance extended to all those



that he had defeated. Ambrose's letters which deal with Theodosius and the battle against the usurpers, and which strongly advocate Theodosius's clemency, are clearly a source of inspiration for Augustine. Indeed, Augustine makes clear that it was due to the natural brutality of war that Theodosius's enemies were killed, not as a result of the direct orders of the emperor.

What is particularly interesting about Ambrose's rhetoric here is the fact that he draws on prominent military leaders from the Hebrew Bible in order to support his argument. In each of the cases mentioned, those of Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and David, Ambrose argues that it was purely due to God's "heavenly grace" (*coelestis gratiae*) that they were victorious in their campaigns (for examples of God ensuring the military success of Israel through these figures, see especially Deuteronomy 7:1-2; Numbers 21:1-3, 33-35 Joshua 6, 8, 11; 1 Samuel 7:3, 9-11; 2 Samuel 5:17-25; 8:1, 10-14). No such examples of military success and kingship are to be found in the New Testament; Jesus's kingship was notoriously non-violent, and the heavenly kingdom which he advocated one was not of this world. In order to find a biblical parallel for Theodosius, therefore, Ambrose has to utilise the Jewish scriptures in order to find a model of God-sponsored military victory wherein a rightful, pious leader, chosen by God, is given the support required to ensure their victory over an earthly enemy. As Ambrose sees it, in the same way as these ancient men, Theodosius is who God wishes to be in power, to rule over his earthly kingdom, and he therefore facilitates his victory over the sacrilegious usurpers. As Ambrose understands it, just as God has once favoured Israel, and aided its prominent men in their conquests, delivering enemies into their hands, he now leans his support to Rome (for another example of a pious king in the Hebrew Bible to whom God granted military victories, see Hezekiah's string of triumphs in 2 Kings 18:3-12). However, this ideology is also very characteristically Roman. The Romans argued that their victory in battle was very strongly connected to their exceptional *pietas* (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.

Keywords in the original language:

- [antiquus](#)
- [caelestis](#)
- [clementia](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [gratia](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [miraculum](#)
- [pietas](#)
- [sanctus](#)
- [Theodosios](#)
- [victoria](#)
- [virtus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [biblical model](#)
- [clemency](#)
- [David](#)
- [Flavius Eugenius](#)
- [Joshua](#)
- [miracle](#)
- [Moses](#)
- [piety](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Samuel](#)
- [Theodosius I](#)
- [victory](#)
- [virtue](#)



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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[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

- [Read more about Ambrose of Milan, Letter LXI.1, 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](#)

Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



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