

ST. AMBROSE OF MILAN, BISHOP AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH
c. 339–397 AD
FEAST DAY: DECEMBER 7—MEMORIAL

Ambrose was born into a distinguished and influential Christian family 339. His father was the prefect of Gaul, governing a large territory covering the western portion of the Roman Empire. After his father's death when he was young he moved with his family to Rome, where he received a liberal arts education common during that time in Greek and Latin literature and rhetoric. With the aim of entering the civil service, the study of law followed. Having distinguished himself while working for the prefect of Italy, he was named the governor of the province of Liguria and Emilia around 372, moving to Milan. Residents of Milan grew to love Ambrose for his upright conduct and virtuous governance as he attempted to maintain peace in a city that experienced much conflict between Nicene Christians and supporters of the Arian heresy. As governor, Ambrose was called on to oversee the elections of the new bishop of Milan in 374 upon the death of the much-despised Arian who occupied the office. Much to his surprise, the people unanimously acclaimed Ambrose as their next bishop. Humbly accepting, he was quickly baptized and ordained to the priesthood and episcopacy.

Giving away all of his possessions, he devoted himself to studying the Scriptures and doctrine so that he could attend to his pastoral duties of teaching, sanctifying, and governing. An eloquent public speaker, Ambrose became renowned and beloved by the people of Milan for his preaching and fatherly care. Even Emperor Theodosius revered this saintly man, submitting himself to the public penance Ambrose assigned to him after he ordered the killing of innocent citizens. A noted theologian, the homilies he gave became revered commentaries on Scripture. His preaching brought St. Augustine into the Church, whom he baptized in Milan in 387. He was also a prolific composer of hymns. Concerned primarily with forming Christians in a life of virtue, many of his writings are ethical in nature; he also wrote treatises on the Christian faith, the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, the duties of the clergy, and consecrated virginity. He continued to exercise his ministry in Milan until his death in 397. Because of his contributions to Church teaching, he was named one of the four original Doctors of the Church in 1298.

Let us likewise deal kindly, let us persuade our adversaries of that which is to their profit, let us worship and lament before the Lord our Maker. For we would not overthrow, but rather heal. . . . Again, our Lord cured with oil and wine the man who, going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, fell among thieves. . . . To Him, therefore, let all come who would be made whole. Let them receive the medicine which He has brought down from His Father and made in heaven, preparing it of the juices of those celestial fruits that wither not. . . . Of wondrous purpose He took our flesh, to the end that He might show that the law of the flesh had been subjected to the law of the mind. He was incarnate, that He, the Teacher of men, might overcome as man.

From Ambrose's *On the Christian Faith* II.89-90



Saint Ambrose (c. 1623–25), Claude Vignon
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota

JOHN 6:26-35 (THE TRUE BREAD FROM HEAVEN)

READING (LECTIO)

Slowly and prayerfully read the passage from Sacred Scripture. Pay attention to the words or phrases that move your mind or heart. Remain open to what God is trying to communicate to you. What speaks to you?

²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. ²⁷ Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.” ²⁸ So they said to him, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do?” ³¹ Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² So Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ So they said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” ³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

MEDITATION (MEDITATIO)

Reread the passage, pausing on the word or phrase that spoke to you or struck you. Rest with that phrase and ponder its meaning with your mind and heart. Then, read the excerpts below and meditate on their significance.

THE LIVING BREAD BRINGS ETERNAL LIFE. We have proved the sacraments of the Church to be the more ancient, now recognize that they are superior. In very truth it is a marvelous thing that God rained manna on the fathers, and fed them with daily food from heaven; so that it is said, “so man ate angels’ food.” But yet all those who ate that food died in the wilderness, but that food which you receive, that living Bread which came down from heaven, furnishes the substance of eternal life; and whosoever shall eat of this Bread shall never die, and it is the Body of Christ.—ON THE MYSTERIES 8.47.

THIS BREAD SATISFIES. Now consider whether the bread of angels be more excellent or the Flesh of Christ, which is indeed the body of life. That manna came from heaven, this is above the heavens; that was of heaven, this is of the Lord of the heavens; that was liable to corruption, if kept a second day, this is far from all corruption, for whosoever shall taste it holily shall not be able to feel corruption. For them the water flowed from the rock, for you Blood flowed from Christ; water satisfied them for a time, the Blood satiates you for eternity. The [Israelite] drinks and thirsts again, you after drinking will be beyond the power of thirsting; that was in a shadow, this in truth.”—ON THE MYSTERIES 8.48.

THE POWER OF CHRIST. We observe, then, that grace has more power than nature, and yet so far we have only spoken of the grace of a prophet's blessing. But if the blessing of man had such power as to change nature, what are we to say of that divine consecration where the very words of the Lord and Savior operate? For that sacrament which you receive is made what it is by the word of Christ. But if the word of Elijah had such power as to bring down fire from heaven, shall not the word of Christ have power to change the nature of such elements?—ON THE MYSTERIES 9.52.

THIS IS MY BODY. The Lord Jesus Himself proclaims: "This is My Body" (Mt 26:26). Before the blessing of the heavenly words another nature is spoken of, after the consecration the Body is signified. He Himself speaks of His Blood. Before the consecration it has another name, after it is called Blood. And you say, "amen," it is true. Let the heart within confess what the mouth utters, let the soul feel what the voice speaks.—ON THE MYSTERIES 9.54.

PRAYER (ORATIO)

Take what you have received in meditation and bring it to God. Enter into dialogue with him. Surrender your thoughts to him. Allow your heart to do the speaking. Allow these reflection questions to guide you.

1. We accept in faith that the bread and wine are truly changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Does this bring you consolation? How can it be a source of strength in your life?
2. We might often think that our salvation is entirely up to us and what we are able to accomplish. Did I do enough for the poor? Did I pray enough? Did I donate enough of my money? But Jesus challenges us in these thoughts: "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent." In what ways are you called to strengthen your belief? How can your belief be lived out?
3. We are constantly being reminded everywhere we go that there is a solution to our longings. Buy this, travel here, practice this technique. Then you will be satisfied. But this Gospel passage reminds us that, ultimately, only God satisfies the deepest longings of our heart. In light of this, in what ways might Jesus be asking you to rearrange your priorities in life?

CONTEMPLATION (CONTEMPLATIO)

Once you have spoken to God, allow him to speak to you. Sit with God. Be in his presence. Recognize that simply being with him is enough. Allow his peace to overcome you. Let him act in your heart.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

A prayer written by St. Ambrose for trust and knowledge:

Merciful Lord, you comfort and teach your faithful people. Increase in your Church the holy desires which you have given. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Empower us to understand the depth of your promises, that all your adopted children may see with the eyes of faith, and patiently wait for the good things you have not yet revealed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

¹ From acollectionofprayers.com. Freely modified from *Prayers of the Early Church*, edited by J. Manning Potts, 1953.