

EXCOMMUNICATION AND THE POLITICS OF
PIETY IN AMBROSE OF MILAN
EXCOMUNICACIÓN Y POLÍTICA DE LA PIEDAD
EN AMBROSIO DE MILÁN

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the excommunication of Theodosius in 390 AD and argues that, although the massacre of Thessalonica precipitated Ambrose's condemnation, this episode was not a spontaneous event, but rather the result of the latter's intellectual interest in the political and soteriological effects of penance. Deeply influenced by biblical exegesis, Ambrose portrayed Theodosius' excommunication as a triumph

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la excomunión de Teodosio en el año 390 d.C. y sostiene que, aunque la masacre de Tesalónica precipitó la condena por parte de Ambrosio, este episodio no fue un evento espontáneo, sino el resultado del interés intelectual del obispo en los efectos políticos y soteriológicos de la penitencia. Profundamente influido por la exégesis bíblica, Ambrosio presentó la excomunión de Teodosio como un triunfo

for both himself and the emperor. However, later Christian sources predominantly depicted this event as a direct clash between church and state, an interpretation that has endured to the present day.

tanto para él como para el emperador. Sin embargo, las fuentes cristianas posteriores coincidieron en retratar este hecho como un enfrentamiento directo entre la iglesia y el estado, una interpretación que ha perdurado hasta nuestros días.

KEYWORDS

Ambrose of Milan; Excommunication; Penance; Political Communication.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Ambrosio de Milán; Comunicación política; Excomuni6n; Penitencia.

Fecha de recepci6n: 24/03/2023

Fecha de aceptaci6n: 08/04/2024

IN THE SPRING OF 390 CE, A FAMOUS CHARIOTEER was arrested in Thessalonica, after having been found in an unseemly situation. The case spurred a popular riot in the city, which caused the assassination of Butheric, Theodosius' *magister militum* in Illyricum. Following Butheric's lynching, imperial officials gathered the population in the circus, where many Thessalonians were put to the sword.¹ Theodosius, who was at the time in the western capital of Milan, is said to have repented after ordering the massacre, but his counter-orders did not arrive on time to the other side of the empire. Upon receiving notice of these events, bishop Ambrose of Milan (d. 397 CE) excommunicated the emperor. A devout Nicene believer who had turned religion into the key ideological underpinning of his propaganda, Theodosius attended mass services without his imperial robes until he was readmitted to the Christian community.

The image of a publicly humiliated emperor, deprived of imperial attributes and symbolically cut off from the Christian flock left a lasting impact on late antique ecclesiastical historians, who have provided detail-rich accounts of the affair. This is one of the most famous and widely discussed episodes of Theodosius' reign. And yet, the sequence of events and their interpretation remains uncertain and open to interpretation.² Theodosius' excommunication has been only transmitted in Christian sources, which consistently portray the conflict as the victory of the pious bishop of Milan over the impulsive or ill-advised emperor. These writings however often offer contradictory information about the causes, aims and location of the key episodes.³

1. According to Theodoret (*H.E.* V 17), 7,000 Thessalonians died in the massacre.

2. Washburn, 2006; Doležal, 2014.

3. Sozomen, *H.E.* VII 25; Rufinus, *H.E.* XI 18; Theodoret, *H.E.* V 17. On the enduring legacy of the event see Schieffer, 1972; Leppin, 2003, pp. 97-100; Maraval, 2009; Lançon, 2014; Hebblewhite, 2020, pp. 100-112.

The event has understandably received considerable historiographical attention over the past decades. A significant amount of scholarly effort has explored the event in light of Ambrose's political and social ideology.⁴ According to Agostino Saba, Theodosius' excommunication demonstrated a profound connection between political and religious thought in Ambrose's case. Jean-Rémy Palanque referred to this moment as *l'apogée de Saint Ambroise*, interpreting it as a quintessential example of the conflict between the Empire and the Church. In his 1989 posthumous monograph, Santo Mazzarino argued that Ambrose was a recognised anti-barbarian, thus opposing Butheric, whose Gothic origin could explain the zeal with which the emperor punished his assassins.⁵ Five years later, Neil McLynn argued that the episode was just a piece of public relations only amplified by the bishop's propaganda. McLynn considered that, in his letter to Theodosius, Ambrose provided instructions to avoid Theodosius' humiliation so that the excommunication became a publicity triumph for the emperor.⁶ Marta Sordi, however, countered that, while Ambrose may have had a better relationship with the emperors than previously thought, a deeply ingrained sense of aristocratic duty compelled him to oppose tyrannical actions.⁷ In his commented translation of Ambrose's letters, Wolf Liebeschuetz largely concurred with McLynn but deemed the latter's assertion that the penance was a propaganda victory for Theodosius anachronistic.⁸ More recently, Mikhail Boytsov has contended that the *tópos* of the elevation of the penitent ruler was a coincidental discovery that is linked to Ambrose's secular rather than theological interests.⁹

In this article, I will build on existing research to argue that Theodosius' excommunication was not a spontaneous event but rather the culmination of Ambrose's yearslong intellectual reflection on penance, which fundamentally shaped his description of the event. Ambrose's treatises on the soteriological significance of penance are roughly contemporary and closely intertwined with his use of excommunication as a tool to intervene in imperial politics. Ambrose's first recorded use of the sacrament of communion against the emperor dates back to 384 CE. Not long after, he penned his treatise *De Poenitentia*, in which he reproved the Novatian schism and emphasised the soteriological value of penance. The theme resurfaced in his

4. Palanque, 1933; Saba, 1940; Paredi, 1982.

5. Mazzarino, 1989, p. 68.

6. Ambr., *Ep. ex. Coll.* 11 [51]. Cf. McLynn, 1994, 315-334.

7. Sordi, 1998 and 2000.

8. Liebeschuetz, 2005. John H.W.G. Liebeschuetz has contended that the event had deeper causes and impact in the relationship between the bishop and the emperor.

9. Boytsov, 2021, pp. 66, 82-86.

De Apologia David, a sermon redrafted for publication around the same time as *De Poenitentia*, where excommunication was depicted as an opportunity for a ruler to exhibit piety, faith, and humanity to his people. The *De Apologia David* is crucial to understanding Theodosius' excommunication. Ambrose's letter to the emperor in 390 CE closely mirrored the scriptural roles and motives outlined in this treatise and framed their confrontation as a ritualised trial between the ideal priest and ruler. Ambrose's treatises offered a blueprint that contributed to educating the Milanese flock and courtiers on the virtues and political implications of penance. Drawing on scriptural models, Ambrose's description of the event portrayed excommunication as a triumph for both the bishop and the emperor. Nonetheless, despite relying on Ambrose's account, subsequent commentators often exploited the event to underscore the church's victory over the empire, revealing the multifaceted interpretations surrounding this evocative episode.

1. JUDICIAL ANXIETY AND ECCLESIASTICAL JUSTICE

The evolution of the concept of penance within the Christian tradition is a dynamic process that culminated in an increasingly structured ritual during late antiquity. At its core, this ritualistic practice ostensibly aimed to facilitate the expression of genuine remorse for transgressions and the pursuit of reconciliation with both God and the Christian community.

The penitential process in late antiquity involved distinct stages. Firstly, individuals should confess their sins to a designated authority, typically a priest or bishop. Another crucial element of penance was contrition, which required individuals to manifest sincere sorrow and regret for the sins they had committed. Finally, penitents demonstrated repentance by performing specific acts, which could include fasting, prayer, almsgiving, or pilgrimages, among others. Penance could be performed voluntarily but was often imposed as a punishment and frequently involved performing bodily displays of contrition and humility. At times, penance could entail acts of public self-humiliation to demonstrate repentance. The severity and duration of these acts were contingent upon the nature and gravity of the sins confessed.¹⁰

Excommunication, which involved formal expulsion from the Christian community, was reserved for the most serious cases. Its duration could be either temporary or permanent, contingent upon the circumstances and perceived gravity of the transgression. Reasons for excommunication ranged from theological deviations such as

10. Chadwick, 2001, pp. 688-693.

heresy and schism to severe moral transgressions and outright defiance of ecclesiastical authority. This punitive measure, however, extended beyond mere retribution; it was designed to serve as a corrective mechanism, compelling individuals to repent and seek reconciliation. Formal pronouncements by ecclesiastical authorities, including bishops and councils, characterised the process of excommunication. Those subjected to this discipline found themselves barred from participating in sacraments and communal worship until they demonstrated genuine repentance and actively sought reconciliation. Reintegration into the community often required undergoing public penance. In the context of late antiquity, the efficacy of excommunication was intricately linked to the broader Christianisation of the Roman Empire. The growing influence of bishops during this period meant that excommunication held both spiritual and social consequences for individuals within the Christian community.¹¹

Indeed, these ritualised processes of condemnation, punishment and remission involved not only the sinner and the bishop, but the whole community. From a procedural point of view, the publicity of excommunication was not a novelty; it followed judicial models that had been successfully tested in previous times. In the early empire, legal proceedings had become one of the most important community ceremonies and a fundamental part of civic life. At that time, judicial processes had an important religious component and were intended as a theatrical display of highly choreographed behaviours. The publicity of early imperial legal procedure (including accusation, trial and implementation of public punishments) sought to prevent similar offences in the future, restate hierarchy and authority, and display the strength of the state.¹² Similarly, penance was a collective ritual that contributed to flaunting the bishop's authority, the unity of the community and the strength of the existing social order.

Nonetheless, excommunication also introduced substantial novelties that did not find parallels in imperial justice. On the one hand, penance had a transcendent meaning and symbolised the stability of the divine order, the eternal peace only attained after death, the end of guilt, the remission of sin, and the certainty of future life. It was, therefore, one of the clearest images of the bishop's mediation between the community and the outside world.¹³ On the other hand, as we shall see below, public penance was often reserved for the upper crust, while other offenders, such as murderers or thieves, were not offered this possibility. The public ritual of penance thus

11. Brown, 1992, pp. 111-112; Uhalde, 2007, pp. 106-121.

12. Shaw, 2003.

13. Uhalde, 2007, pp. 45-47. This is a prolific topic in late antique historiography. See, among other, Brown, 1971 and 1998; Cameron, 1999.

offered Christian elites an opportunity to occupy the centre stage, display their faith and contrition, and proclaim their firm intention to avoid sin in the future.

But what happened when it was the emperor who was excommunicated? As their legitimate power increasingly relied on their role as protectors of the faith, did excommunication offer bishops an unparalleled opportunity to twist the arm of imperial authority and gain influence in the highest levels of power? Or was this just a choreographed conflict that allowed the emperor to portray himself as a pious individual in front of his subject? Ambrose provides one of the most famous cases of excommunication and also wrote two treatises on the topic, offering a window through which we can explore the politics of piety in late antiquity.

2. REHEARSING PENANCE

In 384 CE, six years before his conflict with Theodosius, Ambrose experimented with the political use of the sacraments on another emperor, Valentinian II. At that time, the empire was ruled by three emperors. In the East, Theodosius governed from his court in Constantinople, while the West was divided between Maximus, a Spanish general who had rebelled in Britain and established his court in Trier, and Valentinian II, who ruled Italy from his court in Milan. Despite being the only legitimate member of the imperial dynasty, Valentinian was at a clear disadvantage. He was just thirteen years old and under the influence of his mother, Empress Justina. In addition, Valentinian and his mother were Homoians, *i.e.* they followed a strand of Christianity whose understanding of the Holy Trinity clashed with the Nicene creed followed by Ambrose and the other two imperial colleagues. These religious differences strained on the relationship between Valentinian, Ambrose and Magnus Maximus. The background of imperial competition and religious conflict left Valentinian's court in Milan vulnerable and subject to pressure exerted by rival aristocratic groups. This context contributes to explaining the context that eventually led to his clash with Ambrose in 384 CE.

The conflict started when the urban prefect, the pagan senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus requested the restitution of the Altar of Victory in the Senate House. The altar featured a statue of the pagan goddess Victory which had been present in the curia since 29 BCE. Considered a pagan symbol, the altar was removed by Constantius II in 357 CE, restored by the pagan emperor Julian (d. 363 CE) and removed again by Gratian in 382 CE. After learning of Symmachus' request, Ambrose warned Valentinian that the restoration of the altar would encourage him

to avoid being present as Valentinian received communion.¹⁴ This is Ambrose's first recorded political use of the sacrament of communion. But for all its rhetorical grandiosity, Ambrose's threat was toothless. Valentinian was a Homoian, and therefore he did not communicate with Ambrose.¹⁵

This event preceded the publication of Ambrose's first treatise on penance, *De Poenitentia*, dated sometime between 384 and 390 CE.¹⁶ The treatise exalted the virtues of penance and refuted the positions of the followers of Novatian. An Eastern monk who lived in Rome during the Decian persecution (250 CE), Novatian had been defeated by Cornelius in his attempt to become bishop of the city. Novatian understood Christianity as a community of the saved and adopted an essentialist conception of sin which led him to deny any kind of intercession to redeem those who had sinned or lost their faith. That also included the reintegration of the *lapsi* or *libellatici*, *i.e.*, those who had lapsed during the persecutions to save their life. According to Novatian, penance could not cleanse their faults and they should be excluded from the Christian community. Despite his failure to become the bishop of Rome, Novatian's postulates were adopted by some diehard believers. If we were to trust our sources, this position still had many followers in the late fourth century. Indeed, Ambrose was not the only bishop to address the case; at around the same time, Pacian of Barcelona (d. 391) similarly rejected Novatianism. Half a century later, references contained in Socrates' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which was written around 439, still showed the vitality of Novatianism.¹⁷ Against Novatian and his followers, Ambrose's *De Poenitentia* defended the suitability of penance to ensure the reintegration of sinners into the Christian community. The treatise largely focuses on the soteriological and theological dimensions of penance and ignores its political implications. Ambrose, however, did not miss any opportunity to exploit the latter.

An occasion presented itself in 386. That year, the court requested to use one of the Milanese basilicas for the Arian community. Ambrose's refusal prompted the

14. It is very probable that a face-to-face debate between Symmachus and Ambrose never took place. Ambrose, however, wanted his intervention in the affair to be remembered and so he published both Symmachus' report and his reply among his letters. See Liebeschuetz, 2005, p. 61.

15. Ambr., *Ep.* 72 [17], 13.

16. For the original Benedictine date of 384 CE see Schaff & Wace, 1896, p. 577. For composition between 387-390 CE see Gryson, 1971, pp. 10-15. For composition shortly before 390 CE, see Palanque, 1933, pp. 527-529.

17. Socr., *H.E.* V 19. Written around 439 CE, Socrates' *Historia Ecclesiastica* offers a rare glimpse into the debate about penance in the late 380s and early 390s. Indeed, the historian has sometimes been associated with Novatianism, a doctrinal position that he always treated with benevolence and presented as theologically close to the Nicæan creed.

emperor to send Gothic troops to besiege the *Basilica Portiana* while Ambrose conducted services on Holy Wednesday. Ambrose's followers resisted inside and spent the night praying and singing religious hymns composed by the bishop himself.¹⁸ Ambrose reported that in the morning of Maundy Thursday the reading of the day was about Jonah and how penance redeems the sinner.¹⁹ The sermon's topic was appropriate; traditionally, Maundy Thursday was the day, "on which God died for us and on which in the church the reintegration of penitents takes place".²⁰ After the reading of the book Ambrose reminded those who were present at the basilica, which included some of the soldiers sent by the court that "A book has been read, brethren, in which it is foretold that sinners will return to atonement".²¹ That very same day, the basilica was liberated and the surrounding soldiers, thinking that Ambrose had excommunicated them, rushed to the bishop to beg for forgiveness.²²

The event demonstrated that even an implicit hint at excommunication could be successfully exploited in political negotiation. Soon after the events at the basilica, the court reversed its decision to enforce the temporary use of a basilica for the Homoian cult and the Nicene usurper Maximus rebuked Valentinian II for his treatment of the Milanese bishop.²³ The relationships between the emperor and the bishop could have even ameliorated over the following year.²⁴ But in 387 CE Maximus invaded Italy and forced Valentinian out of the city. More momentous changes took place in 388 CE. On the one hand, Justina died and Valentinian started his progressive conversion to

18. The first of Ambrose's hymns, *Aeterne rerum conditor*, suitably explored the topic of the Holy Trinity, which was the bone of contention between the Homoian and Nicene communities. This hymn also addressed the issue of penance and its power to redeem sinners. Ambrose's hymns, however, are difficult to date and it is impossible to assert whether the *Aeterne rerum conditor* was sung that particular night. See Fitzgerald, 1988, pp. 41-51 and 102-105.

19. Ambr., *Ep.* 76 [20], 24: *Cum fratribus psalmos in ecclesiae basilica minore diximus. Sequenti die lectus est de more liber Iona, quo completo, hunc sermonem adorsus sum: Liber lectus est, fratres, quo prophetatur quod peccatores in poenitentiam revertantur.*

20. Ambr., *Ep.* 76 [20], 26: *Erat autem dies quo sese Dominus pro nobis tradidit, quo in Ecclesia poenitentia relaxatur (...) milites irruentes in altaria, oculis significare pacis insigne.*

21. Ambr., *Ep.* 76[20], 25.

22. Williams persuasively argues that the fact that the troops sent to surround the basilica were of Homoian and Nicene faith demonstrates that the court did not treat the event as a doctrinal issue: McLynn, 1994, pp. 192-193; Williams, 2017, pp. 245-246.

23. Rufinus, H.E. II 16; *Collectio Avellana* 39.

24. Neil McLynn has argued that Ambrose led a second embassy to Maximus after the Conflict of the Basilicas: McLynn, 1994, pp. 160-163, 217-218. For Liebeschuetz, however, an earlier date for the embassy is more likely: Liebeschuetz, 2005, p. 16.

Nicene Christianity. On the other, Theodosius defeated Maximus in late summer and set up his court in Milan.

3. NATHAN AND DAVID

Ambrose's *De Apologia David* likely dates to this period, although its chronology remains uncertain. Most historians agree that the treatise was possibly written around the same time as *De Poenitentia*, likely between 387 and 390 CE. Pierre Hadot, the latest editor of the text, proposed Spring 390 CE as the date of publication. For this author, the vivid depiction of an assassination attempt on Prince David is inspired by Emperor Gratian's death in 383 CE after his defeat against Maximus.²⁵ Additionally, Hadot argues that the dedication of the treatise to Theodosius in one manuscript suggests a later publication date.²⁶ A more possible date, however, is late 388 or 389 CE, a time in which Ambrose concentrated on the study of the Psalms, which provide the theological scaffolding of the treatise.²⁷ While the exact dating remains elusive, it certainly predates the massacre of Thessalonica and likely the incident at the synagogue of *Callinicum* as Ambrose's presentation of these episodes is shaped by the readings and reflections that motivated his *De Apologia David*.

What makes this treatise substantially different from previous disquisitions on the topic is that Ambrose embarked on a more explicit exploration of the political implications of excommunication. Originally a sermon which was later redrafted for publication, this compendium of political theology contained a description of the ideal pious ruler and an open exhortation to the repentance of monarchs. Ambrose put forward the argument that all men could sin and therefore all men should be subject to penance. This applies especially to kings, whose close vicinity with wealth and power put them in a more dangerous position.²⁸

Ambrose illustrated his argument with the biblical episode of King David being rebuked by Nathan. The eponymous hero, David, was presented as the ideal model of a legitimate and morally virtuous ruler, whose management had preserved countless lives. Despite his qualities, however, David was not free from sin as demonstrated by the fact that he had committed adultery and arranged a murder. For Ambrose, David

25. Ambr., *Apol. David* 27. Cf. Hadot, 1977, pp. 33-43. This chronology has been accepted by McLynn, 1994, pp. 155 and 327.

26. The *Manuscriptus Parisinus*. See Hadot, 1977, pp. 30-33.

27. Ambrose's *De Apologia David* contains certain similarities with commentary on psalm 62: see Ambr., *Expl. Ps.* 61, 17-26; Ambr., *Apol. David* 27. Cf. Hadot, 1977, pp. 9-12; McLynn, 1994, p. 155.

28. Ambr., *Apol. David* 9, 15.

demonstrated his virtuosity by admitting his crime and willingly seeking redemption through penance. Ambrose compared David's virtue with that of the angels, but placed even more emphasis on the figure of Nathan. The court prophet, Nathan originally rebuked David but later acted as his guide and led him to repentance. The treatise made no explicit connection between this scriptural episode and fourth-century politics, but it would not be difficult for readers to infer that Ambrose hinted at his relationship with Theodosius.

As well as a discussion of Christian models of leadership, this treatise sought to educate Ambrose's flock and readers on the implications of excommunication. In the treatise, David was not a criminal, but a virtuous ruler who learned to correct his mistakes thanks to Nathan's advice and the cleansing power of public penance.²⁹ Excommunication was thus not a frontal challenge against the sinful ruler but rather a means to inspire greater virtue. More importantly and despite its title, the central figure in the treatise was Nathan, a pious counsellor who tamed and humanised David's authority and protected his community from the ruler's rage.

The dynamic between these two scriptural characters informed Ambrose's portrayal of his own relationship with Theodosius. This was particularly evident in his report about the so-called affair of *Callinicum*. The event took place in the winter of 388 (or early 389 CE) when a group of monks burned a synagogue and a meeting place of the Valentinian sect in *Callinicum*, Syria. We are informed about the case by three Ambrosian letters. One is the letter Outside the Collection 1a to Theodosius, which was published after Ambrose's death. This letter was later edited and included in the main Letter Collection, which was published after Theodosius' death and soon before Ambrose's death. In Michaela Zelzer's edition the edited version corresponds to letter 74 in book 10. Finally, a comprehensive summary of the whole event is provided in the letter Outside the Collection 1 to Ambrose's sister Marcellina, which was only published after Ambrose's death.³⁰

According to these documents, Theodosius initially ordered the *Comes Orientis* to compel the bishop to pay for the rebuilding of the synagogue at his expense and to punish the perpetrators. Ambrose protested by reminding Theodosius of the dangers of acting against God and the possibility of creating new martyrs. Theodosius then agreed to rescind the fine but, emboldened by his success, Ambrose sent a letter to the emperor (*Ep.* 74) in which he encouraged Theodosius to listen to him in the pal-

29. A similar point has been made for the case of Louis the Pious. See De Jong, 1992, esp. pp. 42-52.

30. Paulin., *Vita Ambr.* 22. Although other evidence disputes this fact, Ambr., *Ep.* 30 [24]. See McLynn, 1994, p. 298, n. 25; Savon, 1997, p. 251.

ace “so that he does not have to hear him in church” (74, 33). Such an explicit threat cannot be found in the unedited version (*Ep. ex Coll.* 1a) which could be closer to the original text. Both versions of his letter to Theodosius also contain a puzzling argument and request to the emperor: *i.e.*, that the Christian state should not facilitate non-Christian creeds. This was difficult to meet even for Theodosius, who had turned Christianity into a central issue of his imperial propaganda.

In his letter to Marcellina (*Ep. ex Coll.* 1), Ambrose states that he eventually fulfilled his threat and confronted the emperor in church. During a liturgical service attended by the emperor and members of the court, the bishop interrupted the order of the mass to make a speech to Theodosius. In his address, Ambrose used Scriptural passages to justify Christian violence and threatened Theodosius with excommunication if he did not reverse his decision.³¹ Although the sermon made no direct allusion to Theodosius or *Callinicum*, the references to the Jews as killers of Christ, the comparison between the unworthy synagogue and the church, the imprecations against those who aided the enemies of God, and the references to the need for forgiveness were a very evident allusion to the *Callinicum* affair. Ambrose reported to his sister how, after the sermon, he came down from the pulpit and directly addressed the emperor. If we are to trust Ambrose, the sermon was convincing; as soon as it was finished, Theodosius confessed that he had understood the message and accepted its requests. Ambrose proudly trumpeted his triumph in the final paragraph to Marcellina: “thus everything was done as I had wished”.³²

Neil McLynn has convincingly argued that the threat of excommunication over the synagogue of *Callinicum* was just a tactical move, only intended to draw the attention of the new power while the court was in Milan. Indeed, despite Ambrose’s best rhetorical efforts, it is difficult to construe the affair as a frontal challenge to Theodosius’ authority. On the one hand, extreme rhetorical exaggerations and theatrical scenes such as these were frequent in imperial politics.³³ On the other, Theodosius was presented as a protector of the faith and a ruler who listened to the advice of Christian clerics and eventually corrected his policies. Less than two years later, a clash with Theodosius offered Ambrose another opportunity to explore the relationship between Nathan and David.

31. Gaddis, 2005, esp. pp. 194-197.

32. Ambr., *Ep. ex Coll.* 1 [41]. Ambrose sent the original sermon along with another letter to Marcellina, although he did not add the latter to the collection to avoid repetition.

33. *Libertas dicendi* or *parrhesia*, *i.e.*, free speech, was a leitmotif of Ambrose’s interventions before the emperors. free speech was a right of priests and listening was the rulers’ duty to prove that his power was not tyrannical: Sordi, 1976.

4. THESSALONICA, 390 CE

Contemporary Christian sources have left ample detail on how the slaughter of Thessalonica was implemented.³⁴ The event triggered a vociferous opposition in the West, which contrasts with the more discreet reaction against a similar case that happened in Antioch in 387 CE. On that occasion, a riot resulted in imperial statues being defaced and the reprisal included women and citizens who had been absent or sick during the riot.³⁵ Reportedly, the case of Antioch had been carried in a more orderly fashion, but the fact that it spurred a largely discreet reaction in the West is puzzling, especially if we compare it to Thessalonica. In great measure, the relevance of the latter resulted from Ambrose's extraordinary publicity effort and the fact that the episode was later narrated by ecclesiastical historians.

This also means that our picture is deeply biased as the episode is only described in Christian sources that highly rely on Ambrose's depiction.³⁶ Most of the information on the issue comes from Ambrose's letter Outside the Collection 11, which was only published after his death. But references to Theodosius' penance are also included in the sermon *On the Death of Theodosius*, which was part of the Collection and published soon after Theodosius' death but before Ambrose's. Later sources largely rely on the Ambrosian writings. The most extensive and accurate description is that of the northern Italian historian Rufinus. Eastern ecclesiastical Historians, Sozomen and Theodoret also offered their visions on the events.

The reasons why Ambrose decided to defy Theodosius over an issue that happened on the other side of the empire are obscure. But the timing of the episode is significant. From his court in Milan, Theodosius' distribution of power among aristocratic groups may not have been as favourable as Ambrose and his entourage had anticipated.³⁷ Their loyalty to the legitimate emperor Valentinian II did not pay off as the new emperor favoured other elite networks despite their pagan faith and their support for Maximus. Shortly after the usurpation, the pagan senator Nicomachus Flavianus became prefect of the praetorium.³⁸ Nicomachus contributed to rehabilitating his friend, Symmachus, who in 388 CE had written a panegyric to Maximus and had been ostracised from the political limelight after the latter's defeat. By 390

34. There are some disagreements between Rufinus, *H.E.* XI 18 and Sozomen, *H.E.* VII 25.

35. *Lib. Or.*, 19, 40-42; 20, 5; 23, 12.

36. *Ruf.*, *H.E.* XI 18; *Theod.*, *H.E.* V 17-18; *Paulin.*, *V.Ambr.* 24; *Aug.*, *C.D.* V 26; *Soz.*, *H.E.* VII 25 (Sozomen wrongly places Theodosius' excommunication after his victory over Eugenius).

37. Sargenti & Bruno Siola, 1991, p. 19.

38. *PLRE* I, 348, 868; *Soc.*, *H.E.* V 14, 6. Cf. Matthews, 1975, p. 232; O'Donnell, 1978, pp. 129-143.

CE, Symmachus had advanced in his return to public life and only seven months later Theodosius elected him for the highest office, becoming the consul of 391 CE, even though by now it was less customary for a civilian to hold this position. It is possible that such a decisive endorsement of the entourage of Nichomachus was Theodosius' attempt to neutralise Valentinian's supporters in the West, which could explain Ambrose's frustration in 390 CE.³⁹ In this context, the Thessalonian massacre presented itself as a timely *casus belli* for Ambrose.

Ostensibly, excommunication questioned Theodosius' religious, political, and moral suitability. Being segregated from the community of believers in the imperial court meant that Theodosius had to attend religious ceremonies without his imperial robes and was physically separated from the rest of the community in the temple. Excommunication deprived him of the legitimising patina of Christianity, which had hitherto been a central issue of his political propaganda. However, two aspects challenge this interpretation.

First, Ambrose did not challenge the emperor's authority to exercise legitimate violence. On the contrary, the emphasis of his letter was that the act had been most atrocious (*atrocissimum*) and caused by blinding fury.⁴⁰ In addition, in the same document, Ambrose recognised that the emperor had repented soon after sending his orders and had tried to prevent the slaughter in Thessalonica, although his counterorders arrived too late.⁴¹ By decreeing his excommunication, Ambrose did not seek to change Theodosius' behaviour; he endorsed his decision. Indeed, five years later, in his funeral oration for Theodosius, Ambrose explicitly laid the blame on the inefficient imperial advisors and emphasised the humility displayed by the emperor while undergoing penance.⁴² This became the official version of the episode that would be later reproduced by other church historians such as Rufinus, Sozomen and Theodoret.

Secondly, for a correct interpretation of excommunication, it must be analysed in conjunction with penance. Unlike judicial verdicts and punishments, the penitential process was not the end of the crime, but the beginning of a holier religious life. Excommunication did not seek to extirpate the criminals from the community but to reintegrate valuable members of society through the exercise of penance, which cleaned sinners from their faults so that they returned holier than before. In a society in which asceticism has become one of the highest ideals, undergoing a public ritual

39. Matthews, 1975, p. 16.

40. Ambr., *Ep. ex. Coll.* 11 [51], 6. For Homes Dudden, Theodosius was a typical Spaniard, fanatically orthodox and violent: Dudden, 1935, p. 173.

41. Ambr., *Ep. ex. Coll.* 11 [51], 6.

42. Ambr., *De obitu Theod.* 34. Cf. Sordi, 1976, p. 213; Bonamente, 1979, p. 113.

of humiliation and self-denial was not necessarily seen as a punishment, but a rite of salvation, and an act of divine justice and forgiveness.

Through the heroic lives of ascetics and penitents, late antique clerics created a model of heroes who overcome human frailty and sinfulness to attain sainthood.⁴³ That was also the case with Ambrose. His *De Apologia David* had paved the way for interpreting excommunication and penance not as a moral fall and punishment but as a legitimising rite. To make sure that his interlocutors appropriately understood the message, Ambrose even included the same scriptural references about King David in his excommunication letter to Theodosius.⁴⁴ This context better explains Theodosius' willingness to participate in a ritual that stripped him of his imperial garments in front of his subjects.

Later commentators similarly presented Theodosius' excommunication as a legitimising process but more decisively emphasised Ambrose's victory over the emperor. An example is provided by Ambrose's biographer, Paulinus, who depicted an originally conniving Theodosius achieving a "second victory" after submitting to the bishop.⁴⁵ A slightly more forgiving portrayal can be found in the Syrian historian Theodoret, who established a clear distinction between the submissive Theodosius surrounded by incompetent officials and Ambrose's unshakable outspokenness.⁴⁶ Other Christian writers similarly exploited this particular event to instantiate the transition to a new imperial imagery that discarded the old hieratic countenance and replaced it with theatrical expressions of *humilitas* as a key virtue of the *imitatio Christi*. The importance acquired by this event in Christian sources contrasts with the conspicuous silence of 5th-century historian Zosimus even though he mentioned the emperor's return to Thessalonica in 391 CE.⁴⁷ A pagan, Zosimus rarely missed an opportunity to punish Theodosius' memory and present him as a tyrant. His silence over the episode seems to confirm that excommunication did not weaken Theodosius' authority in the empire. The question, however, stands; was this a pivotal moment that moved Theodosius' towards more decisively Christian policies and ruling style?

In his funeral oration for Theodosius, Ambrose insinuated that, after his excommunication, the emperor changed his policy to rule more in accordance with Christian principles.⁴⁸ Years later, the historian Rufinus explicitly mentioned an instance

43. Uhalde, 2007, p. 110.

44. Ambr., *Ep. ex. Coll.* 11 [51], 7-10.

45. Paulin., *V. Ambr.* 24

46. Theod., *H.E.* V 17.

47. Zos., *H.N.* IV 48. Cf. McLynn, 1994, pp. 316-317.

48. Ambr., *De obitu Theod.* 34.

of Christian-inspired legislation after the events of Thessalonica.⁴⁹ Older scholarship insightfully explored contemporary legislation to create a typology of measures that corresponded to two positions of the emperor vis-à-vis the bishop: resistance at first and later rapprochement.⁵⁰

The laws interpreted as adverse to Ambrose include *CTh.* XVI 2, 27 of June 390 CE, protecting the property of women entering the clergy, and *CTh.* XVI 3, 1 of September of the same year, which decreed the expulsion of monks from the cities (abolished in April 392 by law *CTh.* XVI 3, 2). Although it is not known the extent to which these laws could be universally applicable, it seems significant that both were addressed to Tatian, prefect of the praetorium in the East. It was precisely in this part of the Empire that these two forms of asceticism were causing more disruption of the public order, as the case of the synagogue of *Callinicum* shows. The laws can thus be explained by the contingent context in which they arose. Rather than opposition against Ambrose, these two orders sought to tackle the problems of civic coexistence that asceticism was causing in the East.

By contrast, other laws have been interpreted as Theodosius' attempt to gain the sympathy of Christian believers and clerics.⁵¹ An example is the law *CTh.* XVI 10, 10.⁵² Issued in February 391 CE in Milan, when the emperor had already been readmitted into the Christian community, the law involved the prohibition of entering and performing sacrifices in pagan temples. Although it has traditionally been seen as a turning point in Western religious policy, there is now a tendency to relativise the practical significance that the law may have achieved.⁵³ The law was primarily directed at imperial officials and not at the whole population. The least Theodosius needed at that moment was to attract the animosity of all the pagan citizens of the empire. On the other hand, it is debatable the extent to which the law had universal application, since the same prohibition was issued shortly afterwards in Egypt. The fact that the law explicitly mentions three ranks of officials who were more important

49. Ruf., *H.E.* XI 18-19.

50. Palanque, 1933, pp. 205-221; Piganiol & Chastagnol, 1972, pp. 284-286; Sargenti & Bruno Siola, 1991, pp. 90-94. Rita Lizzi Testa has convincingly argued that Theodosius' religious policy was contingent: Lizzi Testa, 1996, pp. 332-336.

51. Palanque, 1933, p. 230.

52. Biondi, 1940, esp. pp. 413-417.

53. Errington, 1997; Lee, 2000, pp. 123-126; Liebeschuetz, 2005, p. 19. On the problems that exist in talking about a process of Christianisation through the law, see Hunt, 1993, pp. 143-159.

in Italy than in the rest of the Roman West also seems to confirm that it was motivated by the local context.⁵⁴

For Matthews, this law was a shift to more politically comfortable positions for Theodosius, after the supposed pagan revival that brought Nichomachus and Symmachus back into the highest offices.⁵⁵ The law decisively endorsed Christian values but did not marginalise pagan courtiers. Symmachus remained consul of the year and was elected *princeps senatus* in 395 CE and Nichomachus remained prefect until the beginning of Eugenius' usurpation in 392 CE, which he fervently seconded.⁵⁶ Rather than responding to a preconceived ideological plan, this legislation had a contingent and practical character. The exercise of power in Rome required such delicate equilibria to appease competing political parties and ensure that they remained in line without accumulating enough power to challenge imperial primacy.⁵⁷

The three rulings discussed above largely responded to the context of religious conflict in the East and the environment of faction infighting around the imperial court in Italy. Rufinus, however, mentions a law that directly resulted from the excommunication and that instituted a period of thirty days to be observed between the issue of a death sentence and the execution of the punishment.⁵⁸ This description fits *CTh.* IX 40, 13, which was enacted in Verona in August 390 CE.⁵⁹ With some notable exceptions, historians have largely followed Rufinus and linked the law with Ambrose's rebuke after the Thessalonian massacre.⁶⁰ This legislation effectively conveyed that, akin to the narrative of David, excommunication influenced Theodosius' governance of the empire. This message was amplified by later Christian commenta-

54. Fowden, 1998, p. 553. Garth Fowden argues that both *CTh.* XVI 10, 10 and 12 (both in 391 CE) were universally applicable. For a different opinion, see McLynn, 1994, pp. 331-333.

55. Matthews, 1975, p. 236. More recent research has emphasised the extent to which law-making in the Roman world was subject to numerous pressures and balances and involved different institutional scales. Most laws were issued ad hoc for a particular territory, but often responded not only to the specific situation in that region, but also to the context at the centre of the Empire. See Harries, 1993, pp. 3-10 and 1999, esp. pp. 36-40; Escribano Paño, 2004, pp. 150-159.

56. McLynn, 1994, pp. 330-333; Lizzi Testa, 1996; Pricoco, 1998, p. 480. For a different opinion, see Savon, 1997, pp. 239-241.

57. Indeed, less than two years after, a new usurpation erupted in the west and some aristocrats such as Nicomachus revolted against Theodosius. Cf. Matthews, 1975, pp. 239-244; Kelly, 2006, p. 34.

58. Rufinus, *H.E.* XI 18.

59. Biondi and Errington, however, argued that the law was enacted in 382 CE: Biondi, 1940; Errington, 1992.

60. Honoré considers that the law is only loosely connected to the excommunication: Honoré, 1998, p. 67.

tors, thereby contributing to the formation of a myth portraying an initially unruly emperor subdued by Ambrose's outspokenness.⁶¹

Nonetheless, the extent to which this ruling genuinely meant a political change in the governance of the empire is debatable. The *CTh.* IX 40, 13 allowed for a potential revocation of the sentence but did not pose a real limitation of imperial judicial power and did not consider any other provision to ensure the accusers' right of appeal or fairer courtroom procedures in cases of death penalty.⁶²

And yet, despite its limited ability to curtail imperial violence, this *constitutio* had a very rich afterlife thanks to its connection to Theodosius' excommunication. In 506 CE, more than a century after its enactment, jurists commissioned by the Visigothic court decided to keep this regulation in the legal compilation that later became known as the Breviary of Alaric. The breviary contained a selection of late antique Roman laws that Gallo-Roman jurists deemed useful for the management of the Visigothic kingdom. Just like all the other laws in the Breviary, an *interpretatio* was added to *CTh.* IX 40, 13. *Interpretationes* were short commentaries that explained the application and spirit of the law.⁶³ In the case of *CTh.* IX 40, 13, this new addition referred to the measures "issued by the angry ruler" (*quae ab irato principe iussa sunt*). This phrase partly contradicted the statement contained in the body of the law, which described severe punishments as *contra nostra consuetudinem* and seems to demonstrate that compilers were aware of the context in which, according to Rufinus, the *constitutio* was enacted.⁶⁴

5. CONCLUSIONS

As I have sought to demonstrate above, although the massacre of Thessalonica prompted Ambrose's condemnation, it was not a spontaneous event, but rather the result of intellectual reflection and careful experimentation. In Ambrose's treatises on penance, theological and soteriological study was intimately intertwined with the broader societal implications of the sacrament. *De Poenitentia* explored penance's

61. Van Renswoude, 1919, p. 91.

62. Zos., *H.N.* IV 45-49. Cf. McLynn, 1994, pp. 315-320. According to Peter Brown, the law primarily targeted notables in prison and not the entire population: Brown, 1992, p. 110.

63. Matthews, 2001, pp. 12-32.

64. *CTh.* IX 40, 13 (390 CE). Certainly, the battle between Ambrose, the champion of orthodoxy, and the Roman emperor was a highly evocative image for Gallo-Roman intellectuals who lived under a Gothic and Arian king as shown in other parts of the *interpretatio*: (...) *donec pietas dominorum iustitiae amica subueniat*. Cf. Matthews, 2001, p. 17.

capacity to absolve the sins of heretics and *lapsi* to facilitate their reintegration into the Christian community. On the other hand, the *De Apologia David* more explicitly engaged with the political ramifications and legitimising effect of excommunication on devout leaders. These writings laid out a blueprint for a potential clash with a pious ruler that could benefit both parties.

Although Ambrose had experimented with the threat of excommunication in the past, a more favourable context emerged when Theodosius established his court in Milan. More than his predecessors, Theodosius had turned Christianity into an essential element of his imperial persona. In addition, his position in Italy after 388 CE was somewhat precarious. Early that year, he had defeated Maximus, who had gathered considerable support among the Western elites, and side-lined Valentinian, the last legitimate member of the imperial dynasty. Moreover, Theodosius' reliance on traditional pagan families to fill top offices in the late 380s did not sit well with the bishop of the imperial court.

The burning of the synagogue of *Callinicum* provided Ambrose with an opportunity to leverage the threat of excommunication against Theodosius. Ambrose's stance, however, was controversial. His plea for forgiveness for the perpetrators was tantamount to requesting the lack of protection for religions other than Christianity. Such a demand, farfetched even for a Christian leader, has rightfully garnered Ambrose a reputation for religious intolerance among modern historians⁶⁵. And yet, the emperor acquiesced and accepted his fault during a public liturgy.

Theodosius' compliance emboldened Ambrose, who seized the opportunity when a more propitious occasion presented itself. Unlike the *Callinicum* incident, Ambrose's defence of the populace of Thessalonica was indisputable. The event also provided an opportunity to punish an imperial act, while shifting responsibility away from the emperor. The subsequent excommunication closely followed the script set in the *De Apologia David*. On both occasions, the murderous rage of the ruler met the resolute yet gentle behaviour of the holy man, who succeeded in tempering the emperor's passionate nature and guiding him toward piety.

Nonetheless, the emperor's excommunication should not be misunderstood as an empty display of public ceremony.⁶⁶ As stated in *De Poenitentia*, penance could only be administered once and demanded immediate practical responses to make amends, potentially motivating legislative action like *CTh.* IX 40, 13.⁶⁷ Furthermore,

65. MacMullen, 1984, pp. 100 and 117; Brown, 2013, p. 80.

66. McLynn, 1994, pp. 315-330.

67. Ambr., *De Poen.* II 95: *quia sicut unum baptisma, ita una poenitentia, quae tamen publice agitur.*

the episode set the precedent for holding emperors accountable and delegitimised similar actions in the future.

Yet, the ritualised trial of excommunication did not spell political death for the monarch. Instead, it provided an opportunity for repentance and reconciliation with society. Like other ceremonies in the Roman world, penance displayed public authority and social hierarchy, with Theodosius willingly participating in this public exhibition of humility to rebuild his legitimacy after a case of extreme institutional violence against Roman citizens. Humility, constriction, and repentance clashed with more traditional attributes of imperial imagery such as countenance, dignity and gravitas, but perfectly fitted the portrayal of the ideal late antique Christian ruler.⁶⁸

Christian sources capitalised on Ambrose's narrative to present Theodosius' excommunication as the ultimate clash between church and emperor, with the former emerging victorious. These authors portrayed the empire as a violent entity only tamed by the domesticating force of clerics. The central role in the penitential process was played not by the emperor, but by Ambrose, who asserted his spiritual authority over Theodosius and his right to shape imperial decision-making.⁶⁹

This confrontational interpretation of penance, which differed from Ambrose's conciliatory stance, established a framework for subsequent excommunications in medieval Europe. As the medieval period unfolded, the episode became a powerful symbol to discipline disobedient monarchs and intervene in political affairs. Despite Ambrose's best rhetorical efforts, Theodosius' excommunication became a symbol of resistance against the empire that contributed to shaping the relationship between churchmen and rulers for centuries.

68. Boytsov, 2021, pp. 65-68.

69. Paulin., *V.Ambr.* 25 mentions that the Thessalonians later came to thank Ambrose in person.

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