



IL BAMBINO NELLE FONTI CRISTIANE

**XLV Incontro
di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana
(Roma, 11-13 maggio 2017)**

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CAN CHILDREN BE MATURE IN THE FAITH? A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF ST. AMBROSE

Ambrose of Milan is most certainly one of the few figures in Church history about whom we have information not only of their adult life, but also we have stories from their childhood. Written often with rhetorical exaggeration and full of miracles and wonders, such stories do not always show historical truth, but always have one basic purpose: the ancient rhetorical principle – *docere*. The same is true of the description of St. Ambrose's childhood. Taking up the theme of children and maturity in faith, we cannot fail to refer to the story by Paulin the Deacon, the biographer of the Bishop of Milan, who wrote this about his infancy:

And so, when his father was administering the prefecture of the Gauls, Ambrose was born. The infant was placed in a cradle in the courtyard of the praetorium. All at once, as he slept with his mouth open, a swarm of bees came and covered his face and mouth in such a way that they would go in and out [of his mouth]. His father, who was taking a walk nearby with [Ambrose's] mother and his daughter, prevented the nurse, who was responsible for feeding the infant, from driving them away, for she was concerned that they might hurt the infant, and he waited with fatherly affection to see how this marvel would conclude. But after a short time passed they flew out and were lifted so high into the air that they could not be seen by the human eye. When this happened his father was shaken, and he said: «If this little baby lives, he will become something great». Even then, in his infancy, the Lord was at work in his servant, so that what had been said might be fulfilled: Good words are a honeycomb (*Prov. 16:24*). For that swarm of bees produced for us the honeycombs of his writings, which would tell of heavenly gifts and raise the minds of human beings from earthly things to heaven.¹

In the light of these words we can see that Ambrose, from his childhood, was characterized by unique features foreordaining him to the service of God and

¹ Paulin., *v.Ambr.* 3 (PL 14, 30).

God's people and to become an outstanding personality in the Church of the fourth century. They provoke us, as well, to question Ambrose's views on the perfection in faith of children and on the unique personalities who have already in their infancy been characterized by holiness and perfection. Such questions are even more important when St. Ambrose and one of his correspondents themselves raise the issue of the dependence of the perfection in faith on age. In letter 13 addressed to Irenaeus, the Bishop of Milan writes:

You have wisely thought it a subject of inquiry, whether there be any difference in God's love towards those who have believed from their childhood, and those who have believed in the course of their youth or more advanced age.²

The answer is to show and to understand God's relationship to those who at a different age received the faith. It is also a question about the power of faith and characteristic features of the faith accepted at different times of human life. Following these questions and the answers given by Ambrose, it is worthwhile to trace what he, as a chosen and wonderful child some years earlier, speaks about the faith of the child and what features he attributes to it.

1. THE STAGES OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

St. Ambrose in his works shows the stages of human development based on the achievements of contemporary philosophy and medicine.³ In letter 31 (to Orontianus), the Bishop of Milan, in an allegorical way, interprets the description of the creation of the world from the Book of Genesis, and above all the numbers there. He gives them interpretations which in our deliberations are of fundamental importance since he uses them to describe a human life. He writes:

Let then this number seven be observed by us, seeing that the life of man passes through seven stages to old age, as Hippocrates the teacher of medicine has explained in his writings. The first age is infancy, the second boyhood, the third youth, the fourth adult age, the fifth manhood, the sixth fullness of years, the seventh old age. Thus we have the infant, the boy, the youth, the young man, the man, the elder, the aged. Solon however made ten periods of life, each of seven years; so that the first period, or infancy, should extend to the growth of the teeth, to chew its food, and utter articulate words so as to seem intelligible; boyhood again extends to the time of puberty and of carnal temptation; youth to the growth of the beard; adult age lasts until virtue has attained its perfection; the fifth is the age of manhood, fitted, during its whole course, for marriage; the sixth belongs also to manhood,

² *Ep.* 13, 1 (SAEMO 19, 142).

³ See E. Lamirande, *Les âges de l'homme d'après Saint Ambroise de Milan (397)*, in *Cahiers des Études Anciennes* 14 (1982), 227-233; Id., *Âges de l'homme et âges spirituels selon saint Ambroise. Le Commentaire du psaume 36*, in *Science et Esprit* 35 (1983), 211-222.

in that it is adapted to the combat of prudence, and is strenuous in action; the seventh and eighth period also exhibit man ripe in years, vigorous in faculties, and his discourse endowed with a grace of utterance not unpleasing; the ninth period has still some strength remaining, and its speech and wisdom are of a chastened kind; the tenth period fills up the measure, and he who has strength to reach it, will after a full period of years knock late at the gate of death. Thus Hippocrates and Solon recognized either seven ages, or periods of age consisting of seven years.⁴

In the theological argument Ambrose introduces considerations concerning the division of the human lifespan, based on the meaning of number seven. Referring to Hippocrates and Solon, he distinguishes seven periods of human life or his seven-year periods, but it is important for our research that he describes the characteristics of particular periods, emphasizing the development of a child and the development of his physical features. Following pagan philosophers and medics, he does not yet introduce a Christian vision of childhood, but he gives a basis for building such a vision in closing his presentation of these pagan ideas Ambrose gives them a distinctly Christian character:

In this then let the number seven prevail; but the octave introduces one uninterrupted period during which we grow up into a perfect man, in the knowledge of God, in the fulness of faith, wherein the measure of a legitimate period of life is completed.⁵

He therefore emphasizes the development and maturation in the faith, not just physical development.

2. UNSTABLE CHILDHOOD

Expanding this pagan vision and giving to it a theological interpretation, Ambrose follows the popular understanding of childhood and of faith characteristic for that age, often highlighting the instability and immaturity of childhood. First of all, in the context of the Chosen People and the Law given to the people of Israel, he describes childhood as “unstable age”⁶ or “infirm age”.⁷ By interpreting the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians (*Gal.* 3–4), he compares the period of the Old Covenant to the period of childhood, in which all rights and duties are not yet binding: «To the Jews then, as to children, are enjoined not complete precepts but partial ones»,⁸ the Law was given to them as the schoolmaster: «As then young

⁴ *Ep.* 31, 12–14 (SAEMO 19, 306–308).

⁵ *Ibid.* 31, 14 (SAEMO 19, 308).

⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 64, 2; 64, 3.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 64, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.* 64, 4 (SAEMO 20, 176).

children, so the Jews also, are under a schoolmaster. The Law is our schoolmaster». ⁹ God gave the Law because

He knew the Jews to be a stiff-necked people, prone to fall, base, inclined to unbelief, [...] fickle with the instability of infancy, and heedless of commands; and therefore He applied the Law, as a Schoolmaster, to the unstable temper and impious mind of the people.¹⁰

The Jewish nation is portrayed as a child with all the features attributed to this age. Following St. Paul, Ambrose adds another feature of childhood, now somewhat forgotten-heredity. The Jews have been declared heirs, but they are still under the authority of carers and rulers, under the care of the Law:

He gave them the semblance of an inheritance, but withheld from them the possession of it. Thus they have the name but not the benefit of being heirs, for like children they possess the bare name of heirship without its privileges, and have no right either to command or to use, waiting for the fullness of their age that they may be delivered from their governors.¹¹

Going further, Ambrose refers the period of infancy to the Christians, to those who are no longer subject to the Law. For the Law is only the first schoolmaster and as such has to lead to the Teacher, who is Christ for Christians. The Schoolmaster is feared but the Teacher has to show the way of salvation and the way of faith.¹² The Schoolmaster (*paedagogus*) who is suitable for an unstable age is to be a guide in this imperfect age.¹³ The child is not independent but needs a guardian, someone who leads and teaches him. Continuing his reflections, Ambrose points out that the Law, or the Schoolmaster, accompanies the weak, but this weakness refers to carnality, but to moral values. The Bishop goes in this way to the moral sense of Paul's words and sees in imperfect children imperfect Christians who do not need the schoolmaster, but the Teacher – Christ as he says:

[...] for they are infants who know not how to declare the word of God, who receive not His works. For if an unspotted life is old age, a life full of stains is the time of youth. The Law then, that is, *nomos*, was our schoolmaster, until faith came.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.* 65, 5 (SAEMO 20, 182).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 64, 3 (SAEMO 20, 176).

¹¹ *Ibid.* 65, 4 (SAEMO 20, 182)

¹² Cf. *ibid.* 65, 5.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.* 64, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 20, 9 (SAEMO 19, 208).

Like children we have only childish reasoning,¹⁵ unstable views and weak character. We follow the various novelties in the faith and the different, often erroneous, teachings.¹⁶ God somehow adjusts Himself to this human and Christian immaturity and even He directs his Word to man in a manner adapted to his childish intelligence and potential:

There are discourses too like milk, such as Paul fed the Corinthians with; for they who cannot digest stronger food, must have their infant minds nourished with the juice of milk.¹⁷

Generally a child is shown by Ambrose as inconstant, immature, unstable, requiring the schoolmaster or teacher and special treatment. In this general context of childhood, he also includes Christians immature in faith, not fulfilling God's requirements. Consequently, Ambrose describes the abandonment of childhood as a perfection and maturity and shows all the qualities that characterize it:

But who is a perfect man, but he who, being delivered from the weakness of a childish mind, from the unstable and slippery ways of youth, and from the unbridled passions of adult age, has attained to the strength of full manhood, and has grown up unto such maturity of character as not to be easily turned aside by the address of a wily disputer, nor cast, as it were, upon the rocks by the turbid violence of foolish doctrine? Who but he that betakes himself to the remedies of error, who follows truth not only in his words but also in his works, and, takes upon him the edifying of himself in love.¹⁸

Such a perfect Christian, a sage, does not hesitate as a child and is not carried by various teachings and doctrines.¹⁹ Thus, by contrast, Ambrose shows who is a perfect man, who is a mature Christian.

3. MATURITY OF THE INNER MAN

We come now to our main point of discussion, to the question: can the child, according to Ambrose, be mature in faith? In addition to the already mentioned divisions of human life into the various stages devised by pagan thinkers and philosophers, he also creates his own proposal of the division of human life into several phrases. In his interpretation of *Ps.* 36, using agonist terminology, he discusses

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.* 73, 27.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 7, 5; 16, 12.

¹⁷ *Ep.* 36, 6 (SAEMO 20, 24).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 16, 12 (SAEMO 19, 166).

¹⁹ Cf. *ep.* 7, 5. About a perfect sage in the letters of St. Ambrose see M. Wysocki, *Ideal mędrca w listach św. Ambrożego*, in *Vox Patrum* 64 (2015), 581-594.

the term “athlete”, competitions and games. Using the interpretations of Origen,²⁰ he distinguishes the various categories of athletes, and in fact, distinguishes the different categories of human age in the development of faith.²¹ Like Origen, Ambrose states – which is fundamental in our considerations – that there is an age of inner man, an age of virtue in man, which does not necessarily correspond to physical age. This is clearly stated in his commentary on Ps. 118:

We obey the law in all respects if the way of our life does not in any way break the proper behavior of childhood, adolescence, the style of youthful life, the maturity of old age and the ways of passage assigned to each age. Similarly, it should be that our soul would have also a certain ages, along which it passes in its race, as soon as it can say: I ended the race. The age of the soul, precisely, is that of what one says: The age of senility is the integrity of life. At every moment, therefore, it keeps the law of the man who did not mislead the law nor in this age of our body, nor in those stages of development of our soul.²²

In Ambrose, the child, in the context of the whole Scripture, is the one who knows the Father (*I Io.* 2:13-14); a child is the Child that has been given to us (*Is.* 9:6); the children are those who become like children. There is also Christ who taught us that childhood is a virtue and a condition for entering the Kingdom of Heaven (*Mt.* 18:3–19:14). So Ambrose says: «The vigour of the soul can overcome the weakness of an age».²³ In his further interpretations of Ps. 36, the Bishop clearly indicates that those who belong to Christ, although being children, surpass adults in adulthood.²⁴ For him, in spite of the previously mentioned objections to immaturity of childhood, «every age is perfect in Christ, and fulfilled with God. No childhood in faith can be admitted; for children confronted with their persecutors have boldly confessed Christ».²⁵ This is possible thanks to the fact that Ambrose clearly distinguishes between external physical maturity, maturity of character, maturity according the world and maturity of the inner man, maturity of the soul, maturity of virtue and such a measure of immaculate life, of mature life receives the fullness of grace.²⁶ In his *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam* he clearly emphasizes this difference:

And yet, a little child is not physically strong; its character is not formed; its will is not mature. Our Lord cannot mean that one age is preferable to another, if so it

²⁰ See Or., *H36Ps* VI, 2, 121n.

²¹ Cf. E. Lamirande, *Âges de l'homme et âges spirituels*, 211-222.

²² In *Psalmum David CXVIII Expositio* VI, 30 (PL 15, 1278).

²³ *Enarrationes in XII Psalmos Davidicos* 36, 52 (PL 14, 1040): *vigor animi infirmitatem excludit aetatis*.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.* 36, 57.

²⁵ *Ep.* 72, 15 (SAEMO 21, 46).

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 16, 11.

would be a harmful thing to grow up. [...] Why does He say of children that theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven? Perhaps the answer is that they are unacquainted with vice, have not learnt to deceive; are afraid to strike back; know nothing about the pursuit of wealth; and have neither the desire for honours nor the goad of ambition.²⁷

So the Bishop completely changes his perception of childhood, as he states: «you can have, even in tender childhood, a venerable maturity of conduct».²⁸ In *De Jacob et vita beata*, Ambrose explicitly states, with Jacob as an example, that there is a lively senility in grace and that there is a mature infancy in decisions, and that Jacob, by his good works, has anticipated his long old age in his youth and therefore he is called *puer senex*.²⁹ Interpreting the Gospel of Luke and its passage about the birth of John the Baptist and the words referring to him «He shall be great in the sight of God» (*Lc.* 1:15) Ambrose emphasises that

It is not bodily stature that is intended here, but greatness of soul. In the Lord's eyes there is greatness of soul; there is a greatness of virtue. There is also pettiness of soul and childishness so far as virtue is concerned. We calculate a person's age – whether of soul or body – not chronologically but by degree of virtue that person has attained. The perfect man (cf. *Col.* 1:28) is one who has outgrown the faults of childhood, left slippery paths of adolescence, and reached maturity of soul. But the weakling, the petty of soul, has as yet made no progress at all in virtue.³⁰

Ambrose not only gives in this passage a justification for the recognition of maturity in the faith in childhood, but he also shows what is the meaning of Christ's call to become as children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. “Small” – “immature” is in fact an adult, a great one, who does not have the virtue, who falls, who is a subject to the elements of this world, and a small one by the virtue becomes “great” – “mature”, and is exalted above these elements,³¹ because «grown up people, or old people, where virtue is indeed little, are liable to fall».³²

Further, Ambrose points out in many places in his works the circumstances that affect maturity in faith.³³ He emphasizes above all that it can only be obtained from God, not through education. Its achievement is possible by temperance, which makes the youth years mature.³⁴ In order for young people to be mature by their customs and old people through deeds, discipline must also be maintained,

²⁷ *In Luc.* VIII, 57 (PL 15, 1782).

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.* VIII 58.

²⁹ See *Iac.* II, 8, 35. Cf. *In Psalmum David CXVIII Expositio* II, 19.

³⁰ *In Luc.* I, 31 (PL 15, 1546).

³¹ Cf. *ibid.* I, 31.

³² Cf. *ibid.* VIII, 61.

³³ Cf. *fid.* I, 1-2.

³⁴ Cf. *ep.* 14*, 26.

as it improves morals more than age does.³⁵ Ambrose makes in his works a certain comparison, showing the development of faith – a soul that from early childhood was united with God, who did not depart to other gods, who was very early introduced into sacred rites, who is from the beginning in God's love, is the soul of Israel, of an old family and comes from patriarchs.³⁶ He thus emphasizes the unique status of such a person and the important task of preserving that child's faith and maturity.

Ambrose in his works gives, of course, the biblical examples of those who in childhood proved to be mature in the faith, in thinking and in what they have done, who already in their infancy reached maturity of the faith – these are: Daniel, who judged and condemned two old Jewish men (cf. *Dan.* 13); Jacob, who had been fighting with Esau from the maternal womb (*Gen.* 25:27); Jeremiah, dedicated to God from his mother's womb (*Ier.* 1.5) and of course John the Baptist, who recognized Christ and moved in Elizabeth's womb (*Lc.* 1:41). To the Baptist, as mature in faith already in his childhood, Ambrose devotes considerable space in his commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke. He describes him as a saint whose birth brings joy to many. Already at his birth, one can see the features of his future life, and the joy of the neighbours is an image of his future virtues. He did not know the helplessness of infancy.³⁷ As Ambrose states: «[...] he never knew the age of infancy and childhood. Still in his mother's womb he was raised above nature, above age, and began life at the age of perfection; fully mature with the fullness of Christ».³⁸ Recalling the words spoken by Zachary, he notes that telling such important words to the eight-day-old child seems to be unreasonable. However, in the context of the whole text describing the birth of John, it is understandable that he could have heard the words of his father after birth, just as he had heard Mary before birth, since the prophet's ears are of different kind – they are «opened not by physical development but by the work of the Holy Spirit»³⁹ even in such infancy.

But such an example can also be seen in persons contemporary to Ambrose, especially Emperors. Of course, in his words there is subjection and rhetorical exaggeration, but Emperor Gratian, who requested Ambrose to compose *De fide*, can be a such example. In his introduction to *De fide*, he writes that the Emperor may learn from this book that right from the cradle, he always had pious feelings.⁴⁰ Another example among the rulers is the Emperor Valentinian, after whose death, Ambrose giving the funeral speech stated that «we have lost an emperor whom

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.* 14*, 98.

³⁶ Cf. *ep.* 13, 4.

³⁷ Cf. *in Luc.* II, 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.* II, 30 (PL 15, 1363).

³⁹ *Ibid.* II, 34 (PL 15, 1364).

⁴⁰ Cf. *fid.* I, 1-2.

we lament bitterly for two reasons: for immaturity of years and ripeness of age in counsels (*annorum immaturitas, et consiliorum senectus*)». ⁴¹

How important is the childish maturity of faith is also demonstrated by Ambrose as he shows examples of adults who in advanced years have maintained the maturity of children's faith. Certainly the closest example to Ambrose's heart is his brother Satyrus, about whom he spoke in his mourning speech:

And so great was his simplicity, that, converted as it were into a child, he was conspicuous for the simplicity belonging to that guileless age, for the likeness of perfect virtue, and for reflecting as in a mirror innocence of character. Therefore he entered into the kingdom of heaven, because he believed the word of God, because he, like a child, rejected the artifices of flattery, and chose rather to accept with gentleness the pain of injustice than to avenge himself sharply. ⁴²

In this short passage, as we can see, all the important and above mentioned features of a mature child have been revealed by Ambrose. He shows his brother as an example of a real child although in adult age.

Therefore, according to Ambrose, every Christian should become a sage. He should never lose the maturity he may already have obtained as a child, and if he does not have it yet, he should do everything to become like a mature child. ⁴³ Not like a child unstable, wobbly, unconvincing, but as a standing man who firmly holds the faith. In letter 20 therefore, Ambrose asks: «How then can anyone be weak or childish, in whom Christ is the power of God?». ⁴⁴ The Christian no longer belongs to the world in which the child is an example of immaturity, but belongs to Christ, in which the child is a model of Christian maturity.

⁴¹ Ambr., *obit. Valent.* 3 (PL 16, 1359).

⁴² *Exc. Sat.* 1 51 (PL 16, 1307).

⁴³ See J. Pałucki, *Nabywanie cnót w ambrozjańskim programie doskonalenia chrześcijańskiego*, in *Droga doskonalenia chrześcijańskiego w epoce patrystycznej. Zagadnienia wybrane*, edd. F. Drączkowski - J. Pałucki - M. Szram, Lublin 1997, 77-88.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 20, 9 (SAEMO 19, 208).