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*Jan Dominik Bogataj*

## **Inspired by Cicero: Ambrosian Contribution to the Formation of a Clerical Ethos in the *De officiis***

### *Navdihnjeno po Ciceronu: Ambrozijev prispevek k oblikovanju kleriškega etosa v *De officiis**

*Abstract:* The article focuses on the formation of priestly ethics in late antiquity, more specifically at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In his work *De officiis*, in which he draws heavily on the homonymous work of Cicero from more than three centuries ago, the bishop of Milan, Ambrosius, creates an interesting fusion between the ethical ideals of Roman pagan society and Christian doctrine based on biblical revelation. The virtues and values in which he wants to educate his clerics, the new emerging spiritual elite, turn out to be very similar to those found in Cicero: whether it is practical advice on speaking (rhetoric) or a general theoretical perception of morality. Despite the many similarities with Cicero, Ambrose serves up some more typically Christian ethical nuances: celibacy occupies a high place, *otium* becomes prayer and meditation, and *verecundia* receives an even stronger internal emphasis.

*Keywords:* Early Christian ethics, clerics, virtues, values, social elites, pagan ethics, Cicero, Ambrose

*Povzetek:* Članek se posveča oblikovanju duhovniške etike v pozni antiki, natančneje ob koncu 4. stoletja. Milanski škof Ambrozij je v svojem delu *De officiis*, v katerem se močno naslanja na istoimensko Ciceronovo delo izpred dobrih treh stoletij, ustvaril zanimiv spoj med etičnimi ideali rimske poganske družbe in krščanskim naukom, utemeljenim na bibličnem razodetju. Vrline in vrednote, v katerih želi svoje duhovnike, nastajajočo novo duhovno elito, vzgajati, se kažejo kot zelo podobne tistim, ki jih najdemo pri Ciceronu – pa najsi gre za praktične nasvete glede nastopanja (retorika) ali pa za splošno dojetje morale. Kljub številnim podobnostim s Ciceronom pa Ambrozij postreže z nekaj bolj tipično krščanskimi odtenci etike: celibat zasede pomembno mesto, *otium* postane molitev in meditacija, *verecundia* pa dobi še močnejši notranji poudarek.

*Ključne besede:* zgodnjekrščanska etika, duhovniki, vrline, vrednote, družbene elite, poganska etika, Cicero, Ambrozij Milanski

## 1. Ciceronian Prelude<sup>1</sup>

In 44 BC, during a difficult political period, Cicero wrote to his son Marcus, who was studying in Athens, and his famous work *De officiis* was born out of this writing. The work itself was not intended only for his son but also for young Romans of the ruling class. For, in the lofty Stoic philosophical tradition, Cicero believed that those who lead other people must themselves first set a good example of right, good and moral living. This, for him, was the aim and the essence of all philosophy:

“Nam cum multa sint in philosophia et grauia et utilia accurate copiose que a philosophis disputata latissime patere uidentur ea quae de officiis tradita ab illis et praecepta sunt. Nulla enim uitae pars neque publicis neque priuatis neque forensibus neque domesticis in rebus neque si te cum agas quid neque si cum altero contrahas uacare officio potest in eo que et colendo sita uitae est honestas omnis et neglegendo turpitudō.” (Cicero, *off.* 1.1.4)<sup>2</sup>

“For although in philosophy there are many weighty and useful things discussed carefully and copiously by philosophers, the most widely accessible seem to be those concerning appropriate actions and the precepts derived from them. In fact, there is no part of life, neither public nor private, neither forensic nor domestic, neither in how you conduct yourself nor in your dealings with others, when is it possible to be free from appropriate action. It is in cultivating this that all honorableness in life lies, and in neglecting it, disgrace.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Cicero, therefore, the focal point of (practical) philosophy is the *officia* and *praecepta*. In his view, philosophy is intrinsically linked to life, i.e. to ethics and morality. Indeed, these words make it seem that ethics, the reflection on values and virtues, is the most important part of philosophy. Cicero expresses this in a similar way at the beginning of the third book as well:

“Sed cum tota philosophia, mi Cicero, frugifera et fructuosa nec ulla pars eius inculta ac deserta sit, tum nullus feracior in ea locus est nec uberior quam de officiis, a quibus constanter honeste que uiuendi praecepta ducuntur.” (3.2.5)

“But as all philosophy, my Cicero [i.e. *his son*], is fecund and fruitful, nor any part of it barren and desert, so is no subject in it more fertile and ample than appropriate actions, from which precepts are derived for living steadfastly and honorably.”

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written as a result of work within the research program “Values in Judaeo-Christian Sources and Traditions and the Possibilities for Dialogue (P6-0262)” which was co-funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

<sup>2</sup> For Latin quotations of Cicero’s work, I refer to the Latin edition published in the series “Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana”.

<sup>3</sup> For English quotations of Cicero’s work, I use Newton’s translation.

*Officia* and *vivendi praecepta* are, therefore, two poles of ethical philosophy that are irreplaceably linked.

More than four centuries later, as bishop of Milan, Ambrosius began a very similar project (*off.* 1.24).<sup>4</sup> He composed a homonymous work for his spiritual sons, the young clerics—and through them to Christians in general—, in which he laid the foundations for a new Christian ethics, both from a theoretical and a practical point of view (Davidson 1995).<sup>5</sup> This paper will try to outline the basic contours of Ambrose’s ethical programme, as elaborated in his work *De officiis*, based on Ciceronian Stoic morality and fertilised by the Scripture.<sup>6</sup> Instead of focusing on theoretical principles, we will concentrate primarily on the elaboration of practical advice on the clerical ethos, which will at the same time provide a clearer understanding of Ambrose’s theoretical agenda in ethics.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Ambrose’s Addressees

For the sake of methodological and terminological precision, it may be mentioned at the outset that Ambrose uses several titles to designate his clerics. Sometimes the term *sacerdos* depicts the priest or presbyter (*off.* 1.80; 1.152; 1.249; 2.69; 2.76; 2.78; 2.87; 2.111; 2.125; 3.58–59). The term *ministerium* (*minister*) can refer to the diaconate in particular (2.121–122; 2.134; 1.205; 1.207) or to the service of the clerics in general (1.86; 1.152; 1.247; 1.249; 2.25; 2.101; 2.149; 3.58). In other cases, he uses the term *clericus* (2.111; 2.134; 2.150), *ecclesiastici* (1.86) and *presbyteri* (1.87; 2.121–122).<sup>8</sup>

In the first instance, Ambrose writes for his Milanese *presbyterium*, his clerical body, his young men whom he sees as a new *élite*—just as Cicero was thinking not only of Marcus but of a generation of politically ambitious young men (Davidson 2001 [1], 61–62). Along with that Ambrose was certainly influencing a wider range of ecclesiastical officials across northern Italy. He wanted to form the new spiritual leadership and provide them with a new handbook of morals, replacing the older pagan one.<sup>9</sup> As it is clear already from a cursory glance at the text, Ambrose has a special relationship with his addressees, calling them *fili*, his spiri-

<sup>4</sup> For some comparative studies, see Emeneau 1930; Muckle 1939; Diederich 1948; Hiltbrunner 1964; Zelzer 1977; Testard 1984; Rossi 1992; Davidson 2001; Atkins 2011.

<sup>5</sup> A. G. Hamman (1989) delivers a good overview on the priestly formation in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>6</sup> One of the most thorough study in the recent years on Ambrose’s usage of philosophy and about the literary quality of his work is Testard’s article “Recherches sur quelques méthodes de travail de saint Ambroise dans le *De officiis*” (1989). See the work of Savon (2007) as well.

<sup>7</sup> Petkovšek (2021) elaborates well, *inter alia*, on ethics as a practical and not a theoretical science.

<sup>8</sup> For Latin quotations of Ambrose’s work, I refer to the Latin edition published in vol. 1 of Davidson’s monograph which is a new working text for the new CSEL edition based on Testard’s Budé version. A good overview of Ambrose’s perception of the priesthood is elucidated by Bonato (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ambrosius, *off.* 1.22: “Deinde qui illa non legunt, nostra legent si uolent, qui non sermonum supellectilem neque artem dicendi sed simplicem rerum exquirunt gratiam.”

tual sons (Ambrosius, *off.* 1.1; 1.2; 1.23–24; 1.184; 2.25; 2.134; 2.149; 2.152–156; 3.132; 3.139; Bonato 1987, 449–461). Since he has chosen them, he can also teach them: his love towards them is the foundation of his ethical exhortation.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the *De officiis* must have appealed to the Christian believers of his day, since it also mentions ethical principles for the conduct of traders and those engaged in financial affairs (1.242–245; 3.37–52; 3.52–75). These Christian laymen, who by the end of the 4th century were already beginning to occupy important positions in society, were certainly among the addressees of this work, even if not in the most explicit way. Ambrose is known to have dedicated two of his letters to a prominent Christian layman, Flavius Pisidius Romulus (*Ep.* 44[68] and 48[66]).

It is also likely that Ambrose's readers included pagan intellectuals, since they would have been interested in his writings from the point of view of the attitude of the newly emerging Christian society and its relationship to paganism (in this case, Cicero's ethics).

### 3. Historical Context: Forming Priests for Being Ethical Models

If we want to understand Ambrose's *De officiis* and his content, we must first sketch the historical context in which it was written. The Milanese bishop wanted to consolidate the clerical community in the context of the clashes between the homoian Arian theology of his predecessor, Auxentius (*off.* 2.136–143), and the slow progress of the Nicene orthodoxy. If Ambrose wanted to succeed with his quest for the latter, he had to form a new generation of priests (and future bishops across the area) with a very accurate ethical plan.

In this sense, Ambrose's plan was also purely utilitarian: only good priests, properly and solidly educated, could be the flag-bearers of his idea of right doctrine. Utilitarian in the Ciceronian sense of the word, *utile*, to which the bishop dedicated book two of his work: how good behaviour of the clergy is related to the fruits of their testimony. "Nihil tam utile quam diligi, nihil tam inutile quam non amari." (*off.* 2.29) Ambrose dedicates a long passage (2.29–39), with many Biblical examples, to the positive aspects of having a good reputation among the people, of being benevolent towards the others.

This idea of utility is perfectly explained also by a passage from the tractate (*off.* 1.72), in which the author closely correlates civilized behaviour with spiritual and theological soundness. The very way they walked betrayed the two of Ambrose's collaborators (only one of whom was already a priest) that something was wrong with their moral life and doctrinal convictions: one ended up with the Arians, and the other also fell away from the Church because of greed for money.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ambrosius, *off.* 1.24: "Itaque illi necessitate diliguntur quae non satis idonea atque diuturna est ad perpetuitatem diligendi magistra; uos iudicio, quo magnum caritatis pondus ad uim diligendi adiungitur: probare quos diligas et diligere quos elegeris." Cf. *off.* 2.155.

“Hoc solum excepti nec fefellit sententia: uterque enim ab Ecclesia recessit ut qualis incesso probebatur, talis perfidia animi demonstraretur. Namque alter arianae infestationis tempore fidem deseruit, alter pecuniae studio, ne iudicium subiret sacerdotale, se nostrum negavit. Lucebat in illorum incesso imago leuitatis, species quaedam scurrarum percursantium.” (1.72)<sup>11</sup>

“I did not prove mistaken in my judgement, for both of them went on to leave the church: they showed themselves to be every bit as faithless in spirit as their style of walking had suggested. One deserted the faith at the time of the Arian onslaught; the other was so keen on money that he was prepared to say he was not one of us, so as to escape being judged by his bishop. The hallmark of the fickleness inside these men was plain in the way they walked—they had all the appearance of wandering jesters.”

Therefore, we see how the author closely links external behaviour with internal behaviour on the one hand (cf. 1.71: “uox quaedam est animi corporis motus”), and morality and doctrine on the other. Priests should give *testimonium bonum*, not just among the faithful but among those who are outside as well, and *publica existimatio* should bear witness to their virtues, with which they were to be adorned (1.247). The personal integrity of their behaviour should be seen both by the people in the Church and outside. Ambrose is saying that the priestly ministers must pay attention to their good reputation in society at large: “Nam neglegere bonorum iudicia uel adrogantiae uel dissolutionis est.” (1.227)

#### 4. The Appropriate Way for Priests to Speak

The area where rhetoric and ethics intersect is perhaps one of the most interesting in terms of Ambrose’s Ciceronian inspiration. Although a detailed analysis of the influence of his rhetorical works, both “major” (*De inventione, De oratore, Brutus, Orator*) and “minor” (*De optimo genere oratorum, Topica, Partitiones oratoriae*), is impossible at this point, a comparison in some case studies will show to what extent the most famous Roman orator influenced Ambrose’s teaching on ethics in speech. Ambrosian appropriation of the Ciceronian oratorical ideal, through which bishops and priests embodied the ideal orator of the classical age, can be perhaps foremost seen in linking *sapientia* and *eloquentia* (Cicero, *de inv.* 1.2; *de orat.* 3.142).

Ambrose distinguishes two types of speech for priests: informal and formal discourse, the latter addressing issues on faith and justice (*off.* 1.99). He suggests modesty, kindness, peacefulness, and pleasantness in both types.

The way of speaking is extremely important for the bishop of Milan because, in his view, it reveals either an orderly or a disorderly interior. The voice must be plain and clear, preserving a pace and not affecting a theatrical cadence (*off.* 1.104), and

<sup>11</sup> For English quotations of Ambrose’s work, I use Davidson’s translation.

it should be balanced (1.84). *Verecundia* is essential when speaking in order that one does not go beyond the *modus* (1.67; cf. 1.76) and the *ordo* (1.225). The language of a good minister should be full of elegance and pleasantness, without any jokes, especially those improper ones (1.102–103; cf. 1.85); he should avoid “fabulae de saeculo ac uoluptatibus” (1.85–86; cf. 1.88) and “fabulae profanarum et anilium” (1.184). Not a word should slip out dishonourably from a priest and neither should he engage in the listening of any immodest talk (1.76; cf. 1.86). *Sermo* of a one who gives advice should be “salubris atque inreprehensibilis” (2.86). Ambrose’s ideals in this case seem to be very similar to Cicero’s as the latter, for example, in book 1 of the *De oratore* advocates clearly that an orator has to have a vigorous voice, a gentle gesture and a kind attitude.

Even more, it must *affabilis* in order to gain people’s favour (*off.* 2.96), but without falling into flattery, falsehood, and hypocrisy (2.96; cf. 1.226; 2.112). “Accedat tamen suavis sermo ut conciliet sibi adfectum audientium gratum que se uel familiaribus uel ciuibus uel, si fieri potest, omnibus praebeat.” (1.226; cf. 2.96) Another danger of speaking is that we allow our passions to overwhelm us. Ambrose is clear that priests need to exercise self-control, not to fall into anger (1.5–22; 1.90–97). Silence plays a big role in avoiding anger: wise people know how to be quiet when it is appropriate, but, according to Ambrose, it is much harder to be silent than to speak (1.5–22; 1.31–35; 1.68; 1.234; 1.236; 3.1–7). Compared to Cicero, Ambrose assigns a much greater role to silence (Cicero, *De orat.* 3.79; Quiroga 2010).

Nonetheless, since a priest also has a public office, he still has to speak and teach. For these cases, Ambrose advises recourse to the Scriptures, in which the good minister should find the content of his discourse: for the improvement of life, for the encouragement to prudence, for morality in general (*off.* 1.100). Recourse to Scripture is especially valid when it comes to speaking on matters of faith and morals. In the light of the daily reading of God’s Word, the priest should direct his teaching to be simple enough, acceptable, decent, and pleasant to listen to (1.101).

## 5. Ecclesial Ethics of the Community

Ambrose’s ethics is not individualistic—on the contrary, it includes a clear communal dimension. It can be said that this feature shows one of the novelties in comparison with Stoic or Ciceronian morality, since for Ambrose the community is not only a place for the exercise of personal moral integrity, but for him ecclesiology opens up a new dimension of faith and love for one’s neighbour on a religious basis. For Cicero, *societas/communitas* implies a group of people united in a common purpose (business, politics, even the entire human race) of stronger or weaker degrees; *res publica* means commonwealth, the concern of a people, implying a proper distribution of power within a political community, or a good regime; and *civitas* refers to the organization of a people, to the distribution of

power within a given political community, that is, to its regime, and therefore can be translated as “political community”. In *off.* 1.13, for example, the Roman rhetor defines love as something natural that congregates people, but the fundamental principle of his view of society remains justice.

According to Ambrose, love among Christians is a unifying principle because we are to love more those with whom we will be for all eternity, counting, of course, on the help of grace: “Non enim uehementior est natura ad diligendum quam gratia.” (*off.* 1.24). Ambrose himself shows by his example that, especially among clerics, mutual love is the first thing that is needed. With rhetorical enthusiasm, he writes:

“Amate uos inuicem. Nihil caritate dulcius, nihil pace gratius. Et uos ipsi scitis quod prae ceteris uos semper dilexi et diligo: quasi unius patris filii coaluistis in adfectu germanitatis.” (2.155)

“Love one another. Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing is more pleasant than peace. And you know yourselves that I have always loved you and do love you above all others: like the sons of the father, you have grown together in the fondness of brotherhood.”

For him, the believing community, the Church, is like a family since it is rooted in grace, in partnership in the faith, in communion in the mysteries (*off.* 1.170). According to the bishop of Milan, there is nothing more beautiful in this earthly life than *amicitia cum fratribus*. This gives comfort, protects loyalty, teaches equality but the brotherly love is always related to the matters of faith: “Non potest enim homini amicus esse, qui Deo fuerit infidus.” (3.132–133).

The Church is presented as the place where the common vocation of all Christians is exercised. Ambrose calls her *forma iustitiae* and *commune ius*, since the rights and the activity, the prayer and the temptations are common (*off.* 1.142), and *una domus*, since she contains all Christians (1.88). The bishop of Milan is also keen on using the Biblical metaphor of the body when speaking about the Church: his clerics are like the members of his body (2.134–135) and not only the Church but the whole humanity is inextricably linked together (3.19).

In such a community, the role of the bishop is central, and he must ensure justice (*off.* 2.121). He must be obeyed and no one should boast over him otherwise he departs from the way of the truth (2.123). Ambrose also argues for the eminence of the ministry in the Church by referring to the Jewish Levites: the duty to serve God in the Church is before the duty to parents (1.257–258).

Ambrose is aware, of course, that there are various ministries in the Church which bring with them a certain honour, but he asks that striving for these ministries remain motivated by doing good and avoiding arrogant presumption, careless complacency, dishonourable pretension and unseemly ambition (*off.* 2.119).

## 6. Practical Advice for Priests

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One further characteristic of Ambrose's ethics is practicality. He was aware that discussing the clerical ethos, in general, would not fully address the needs of his addressees. He even touches, for example, the manner of walking, which may already reflect an inner moral mood: walking should be calm, not too fast and not too slow (*off.* 1.72–75). The same applies to dress, which should be neither neglected nor too ostentatious (1.82–83).

Ambrose pays special attention to the social contacts of his addressees. He is aware that bad company can quickly draw them into bad actions, so he strongly advises against socialising with people who cannot control themselves (*off.* 1.85). Furthermore, he warns against too close contacts with people outside the Church and against taking part in their parties, which can quickly lead Church ministers astray into excessive food and drink, or simply give a bad impression because they are indulging in debauchery (1.86).

Particularly interesting and illustrative is the advice about visiting widows or young women, which he advises against for young priests, either because it is a sinful occasion or simply to make a bad impression. Such visits, if necessary, should always be accompanied by an elderly person:

“Viduarum ac uirginum domos nisi uisitandi gratia, iuniores adire non est opus, et hoc cum senioribus, hoc est cum episcopo, uel si grauior est causa, cum presbyteris. Quid necesse est ut demus saecularibus obtrectandi locum? Quid opus est ut illae quoque uisitationes crebrae accipiant auctoritatem? Quid si aliqua illarum forte labatur? Cur alieni lapsus subeas inuidiam? Quam multos etiam fortes illecebra decepit! Quanti non dederunt errori locum et dederunt suspicioni!” (1.87)

“There is no reason for younger men to go near the houses of widows and virgins, unless they are on an official visit. Even this should be done in the company of older men—namely, the bishop, or, if the situation is that serious, with the priests. Why should we give worldly people occasion to criticize us? Why should such visits take on some significance by their frequency? What if one of these women were by chance to fall? Why should you come under reproach because someone else has fallen? Think how many men there are, strong men, too, who have been taken in by charms like these. Think how many there are who have given no occasion for any kind of transgression, but have given plenty of occasion for suspicion!”

Ambrose's advice on leisure time can also be counted among the practical tips for the behaviour of priests. He recommends reading (of the Scripture) (*cf. off.* 1.165), but above all prayer, abiding in the company of Christ: “Cur non Christum reusas, Christum adloquaris, Christum audias? Illum adloquimur cum oramus, illum audimus cum diuina legimus oracular.” (1.88) But even prayer can fall into the danger of becoming something externalised or an occasion for exaltation before others and, therefore, Ambrose advises modesty even in prayer (1.70).



Practical and concrete advice on behaviour includes a warning about the responsibilities and dangers that await young men: “Est igitur bonorum adulescentium timorem Dei habere, deferre parentibus, honorem habere senioribus, castitatem tueri, non aspernari humilitatem, diligere clementiam ac uerecundiam quae ornamento sunt minori aetati.” (*off.* 1.65; cf. 1.212; 1.217–218) The bishop of Milan warns about deserting the faith or giving up (1.72; 1.188; 1.256; 3.126); he even admits the possibility of betrayal (3.137). Ambrose exhorts his young clerics through different Biblical examples that they have to behave like that as they are prepared also to face danger, troubles, and adversities in their ministry (3.82–85; 3.88; 3.90; 3.124).

## 7. Ascetical Ethics: Christianity as *perfectum officium*

In Ambrose’s logic, a real Christian behaviour is sacrificing your own interests for the sake of others, loving your neighbour even if he hates you—this is the *officium perfectum* (*off.* 1.36–37). *Medium officium* may be achieved by the many, but the *perfectum officium* is attainable only by the few—and the Christian clergy is, in Ambrose’s view, the first to strive for this perfection (3.10; 3.12; 1.16; 1.125; 1.184; 1.217–218).

One of the areas where Ambrose is furthest from pagan morality—because advice like avoiding wine (*off.* 1.247) is a quite common thing among the moralist from Antiquity—is in the area of chastity or celibacy. Of course, Peter Brown’s thesis that Christian *castitas* is in tradition with the Stoic, Platonic and other ethics of imperial Rome is true to a certain extent (Brown 1988).<sup>12</sup> But on the other hand, Christianity also brings a newness which primarily means a deepening, a religious grounding and a radicalisation of doctrine, especially in terms of celibacy. Certainly, the greater emphasis on celibacy and virginity as a way of religious life is more pronounced in the later and greater ascetic writers (Grandi 2021), so Ambrose seems somewhat halfway between the old pagan and the new Christian morality. He requires his clerics to strive for chaste and shameless behaviour towards women. *Castitas, verecundia, pudicitia, integritas, continentia, modestia*—these are the key terms of the bishop of Milan for describing the right approach of his young clerics towards the opposite sex. In his “utilitarian” logic he asks himself, what is more *utile*, beneficial, and *honestum*, honourable, than chastity, than maintain our bodies untainted, than the behaviour by which the kingdom of heaven is obtained (*off.* 2.27).

He is even so explicit in his advice that he is not ashamed to mention the so-called *braccae*—a male garment similar to trousers, but shorter and less loose-fitting, from which, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, underwear originated—, which priests were supposed to have worn already in the Old Testament (Ex 28:42-43). Ambrose mentions that

<sup>12</sup> The question of celibacy in Ambrose is treated by him only superficially, briefly, in the sense that priestly celibacy developed on the basis of ideals of female virginity (Brown 1988, 357ff.).

even in his own time some priests still retained this custom in order to preserve modesty and protect chastity, though most interpret it spiritually (*off.* 1.80).

The most explicit reference to celibacy is in *off.* 1.249 where he describes a close relationship between the priestly ministry and the abstinence of any marital intercourse:

“Inoffensum autem exhibendum et immaculatum ministerium nec ullo coniugali coitu uiolandum cognoscitis qui integri corpore, incorrupto pudore, alieni etiam ab ipso consortio coniugali, sacri ministerii gratiam recepistis.” (1.249)

“But you are quite aware that you have this obligation to present a ministry that is blameless and beyond reproach, and undefiled by any marital intercourse, for you have received the grace of the sacred ministry with your bodies pure, and with no experience at all of marital union.”

Without turning a blind eye to the reality, he mentions even that in some places priests have fathered children. He attacks those who were apologizing for this practice with claims about the ancient custom of Jewish priests and Levites who were to offer sacrifices only at intervals, according to a weekly cycle. Ambrose counters this with the objection that even ordinary Jews, two or three days before going to the Temple to offer sacrifice, abstained from sexual intercourse, which is mentioned in Ex 19:10: “and they washed their clothes.” All the more so now that, as Ambrose argues, it is impossible for Christian ministers to offer sacrifices if the soul or body is unclean. Even an unclean look can be defiling (*off.* 1.256).

Another aspect of the Ambrosian ascetics for the priests lies in nurturing poverty which can contribute to the *uita beata* (*off.* 2.15). He dedicates many pages to the formation of the right attitude and behaviour towards the earthly goods whom he considers more of an obstacle than a help on the way to happiness (2.16; 2.15–21). *Contemptus diuitiarum* (1.23) is crucial if the young priests want to continue their journey towards perfection (1.137–138; 1.193; 1.195). Ambrose wants his addresses to form their souls to such a pitch that they will not attach any great importance to *diuitias*, *voluptates* or *honores* (1.182). The true tranquillity of spirit or the true temperance, claims Ambrose, cannot be reached by *stadium quaerendi* or *metus egestatis* (1.185). Ambrose’s ethics are very clear and decisive in this area: one must strive for virtue and defend oneself against greed (1.242–246; cf. 2.25; 2.66). Once again, the bishop of Milan emphasizes the tangible benefits of a virtuous life: “Illud magis decet ut supra thesaurum sit animo et infra amicum obsequio; humilitas enim auget gratiam.” (2.67)

Nothing better describes Ambrose’s tactful, calm, balanced, sober ethics than the following passage, when he talks about the need to be content with what we have, with a modest life, without exaggeration:

“Ideo boni uir consilii dicit: *Ego enim didici in quibus sim sufficiens esse* (Phil 4,11). Sciebat enim *omnium malorum radicem esse auaritiam*, et ideo

suo contentus erat, alienum non requirebat. Satis mihi est, inquit, quod habeo: siue parum siue plurimum habeam, mihi plurimum est. Expressius aliquid dicendum uidetur. Signato uerbo usus est: Sufficit mihi, inquit, in quo sum, id est, nec deest nec superfluit. Non deest quia nihil quaero amplius, non superfluit quia non solum mihi habeo sed pluribus.” (*off.* 2.89)

“This is why the man who gives good advice says: ‘I have learnt what it is to know that I have sufficient, whatever my circumstances.’ (Phil 4:11) He was well aware, you see, that greed is “the root of all evils”, and so he was content with what he had himself, and did not chase after things that belonged to other people. It is enough for me,’ he said, ‘that I have what I have: whether I have little of plenty, it is plenty for me.’ But perhaps we need to make the point clearer still. The precise word that he used is significant: ‘There is sufficient for me,’ he said, ‘whatever my circumstances.’ What he meant, in other words, was this: ‘I neither find myself in want, nor do I find that I have too much. I am not in want, because I am not looking for anything more; I do not have too much, because what I have is not just for my own good: it is the good of many.’ He was speaking about money.”

For Ambrose, the opposite of greed for money—which is not a new thing, but it is deeply rooted in human hearts (*off.* 2.129-132)—is charity and almsgiving (2.108-109; cf. 1.28-29; 1.45-46; 1.59) and striving for honest behaviour (3.57). It speaks out explicitly and forcefully against those priests who seek to gain access to the inheritance of others by trickery and hypocrisy (3.58). In this respect, too, Ambrose seems to be somehow halfway between the old pagan evergetism and the Christian radical renunciation of property as propagated by the ascetic writers. In his ethics, we find no exaggeration, but moderation, right measure, concern for justice and balance.

## 8. (Ciceronian) Postscript

Compared to Cicero, Ambrose’s treatise turns out to be much more practical. If the work of the former is concerned with giving advice on the basis of the “rule”—even though it can be classified as a work of practical ethics in general—, then the work of the latter, in addition to theoretical reflections, offers a great deal of concrete advice as well, representing clearly the (clerical) ethos of the bishop of Milan. Nonetheless, just as Cicero, who is convinced that only a governing class educated to a high manner of conduct can restore the Republic to a healthy condition, Ambrose too relies on the role of his clergy in the ethical renewal of the people entrusted to him. Moral criticism was rather the constant topos of authors belonging to the social class of patricians and equities (and Ambrose, by his origins and social background, certainly belongs to the highest elite) (Salzman 2000). As is clear from his *De officiis*, for Ambrose, more than the whole God’s people,

the new social elite is primarily the clerics. But since these are the most educated and, more importantly, the most spiritually formed members of the Christian community, we can speak of a kind of “positive” clericalism that grounds the greater importance of clerics not primarily in their ontological or economic privileges, but in their moral (and spiritual) life. Ambrose’s morality, therefore, also in this aspect, appears to remain somehow halfway: it does not (yet) bridge the gap between the old elitist idea of society and the new Christian one, more egalitarian.

Finally, to delineate all that has been said, we can contrast Cicero’s ethics with Ambrose’s by way of example on the concept of *verecundia*.<sup>13</sup> For Cicero, honesty comprises the complex of the four fundamental virtues, i.e. prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance. Ambrose, too, considers *verecundia* in his treatise: it is especially appropriate for adolescents.<sup>14</sup> However, from the very beginning, Ambrose makes the biblical inspiration of his work clear.<sup>15</sup> In fact, he uses biblical examples to attribute certain specifically Christian traits to *verecundia*, such as, for example, moral modesty. Truthfulness is rooted in man’s inner dispositions and is closely linked to the spiritual life. For the bishop of Milan, internal righteousness is of fundamental importance: decency lies within man. For Ambrose, *verecundia* is above all a spiritual quality, the beauty which emanates from within man and shows itself in his words and actions. Thus Ambrose emerges as more of a Neoplatonist, compared to the rather more Stoic Cicero: in the former, the concern for modesty and reserve has more interior importance. The care for external behaviour, in Ambrose’s thought, derives from the inner truth, which is basic to being able to live as a cleric (Bonato 1987, 449–461). The ethical rules proposed by Ambrose are not in function of a worldly appearance that would aim to hide the true inner reality in order to deceive the other, but to make one’s own inner light appear in all its splendour, to let oneself be known by the other.

In *De officiis*, Ambrose shows himself to be a careful mentor of his young clerics, in whom he sees a new social elite. He weaves into his advice for their moral education a number of intuitions that were already present in Cicero’s work. In fact, in some respects, for example with regard to the ideal orator, Ambrose, through his vision of the leaders of the Christian community, can be said to fully embody Cicero’s ideal of the orator, in whom moral integrity, rhetorical skill and zeal for the common good are perfectly in harmony. On the other hand, it complements the old pagan moral precepts by using biblical examples and some other more Christian elements, such as greater attention to celibacy, worship, prayer, loving community. We can conclude that Ambrose’s Christian morals, which in this work is primarily addressed to clerics, echoes to a certain extent an innovative approach, which nevertheless remains very strongly inspired by Cicero.

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this topic, see Janssens 1992.

<sup>14</sup> For a general synthesis on Ambrose’s role in the history of moral theology, see Deman (1953).

<sup>15</sup> An example of the confrontation and interplay between the virtues of pagan antiquity and the Bible is the study carried out by Avsenik Nabergoj (2021) in which she elaborates well this fundamental binome.

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