

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Ambrose of Milan

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 7

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IN BRIEF

Saint Ambrose of Milan

Fourth-century Bishop of Milan, Father and Doctor of the Church, hymn writer and teacher of Saint Augustine.

Feast day	December 7
Born	c. 339, Trier (now in Germany)
Died	April 4, 397, Milan, Italy
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity); Doctor of the Church in 1298
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	Milan, beekeepers

In this booklet

Life

Hymn of Saint Ambrose "O God, Creator of All Things"

Novena to Saint Ambrose of Milan

Basilica of Saint Ambrose in Milan, Tomb of the Saint

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Ambrose of Milan

Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan from 374 to 397, is one of the great figures of the early Church. A high Roman official acclaimed bishop before he was even baptized, he became a tireless pastor, a preacher whose eloquence moved Saint Augustine, a writer of hymns still sung today and a bishop who dared to stand up to emperors. He is a Father and Doctor of the Church, celebrated on December 7, the anniversary of his ordination as bishop.

Who was Saint Ambrose?

Ambrose was born around 339 in Trier, then one of the capitals of the Roman Empire, where his father served as praetorian prefect of the Gauls. He belonged to a Christian family of the Roman aristocracy. When his father died, his mother moved to Rome with her three children: Marcellina, who would receive the veil of consecrated virgins from Pope Liberius, Satyrus and Ambrose.

The young man received a solid education in law and rhetoric and learned Greek, which later allowed him to read the Eastern Fathers. He entered the imperial administration and, around 370, became governor of the province of Aemilia-Liguria, whose capital was Milan.

Key dates in the life of Saint Ambrose

- **c. 339**: Born in Trier.
- **c. 370**: Governor of Aemilia-Liguria, based in Milan.
- **374**: Acclaimed Bishop of Milan while still a catechumen; he is baptized, then ordained bishop on December 7.
- **385-386**: Refuses to hand over a basilica to the Arians, who are backed by Empress Justina.

- **June 386**: Discovery of the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, placed in the new Basilica of the Martyrs.
- **Easter Vigil 387**: Baptizes Augustine, his son Adeodatus and his friend Alypius.
- **390**: After the massacre of Thessalonica, demands public penance from Emperor Theodosius.
- **395**: Delivers the funeral oration for Theodosius, who died in Milan.
- **April 4, 397**: Dies in Milan, on Holy Saturday.
- **1298**: Pope Boniface VIII proclaims him a Doctor of the Church, along with Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great.

"Ambrose for bishop!"

In 374, Auxentius, the Arian Bishop of Milan, died. The succession was fiercely disputed between Arians and Catholics, and Governor Ambrose went to the church to keep order. According to his biographer Paulinus, a child's voice then rang out: "Ambrose for bishop!" The crowd took up the cry. Ambrose, who was still only a catechumen, tried to escape, but had to give in. Within days he was baptized and received holy orders, and he was consecrated bishop on December 7, 374.

He took his charge seriously. He gave his goods to the poor and to the Church, set himself to study Scripture and the Greek theologians, and lived simply. His door was open: Augustine tells us that anyone could come in unannounced, and that Ambrose was often found reading in silence, which was surprising at a time when people read aloud.



The Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, where Saint Ambrose is buried.

A pastor and a teacher

Ambrose preached almost every day. His commentaries on Scripture, such as the *Hexameron* on the six days of Creation or the *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, grew out of his homilies. He also wrote instructions on the sacraments for the newly baptized, which remain a precious source on the early liturgy, and a treatise on the duties of the clergy inspired by Cicero.

He defended consecrated virginity and paid great attention to the poor: to ransom captives, he did not hesitate to have the sacred vessels melted down.

It was in Milan that Augustine, then a professor of rhetoric, came to hear him out of curiosity, drawn by his reputation as an orator. Little by little, the way Ambrose explained the Old Testament removed his objections. Ambrose baptized him at the Easter Vigil of 387. Augustine remained deeply grateful to him, and his mother, Saint Monica, revered him.

Standing before emperors

Ambrose lived at the heart of power: Milan was then an imperial residence. He advised the young emperors, but refused to bend when faith or justice were at stake. In 386, Empress Justina, who favored the Arians, demanded a basilica for their worship. Ambrose refused: he shut himself in the church with the faithful, who kept watch day and night.

To keep up their courage, he had them sing hymns and psalms in the manner of the Eastern Churches, as Augustine explains in the *Confessions*. This was the origin of hymn singing in the West.

In 390, to punish a riot in Thessalonica, Emperor Theodosius allowed thousands of its inhabitants to be massacred. Ambrose wrote to him that he could not celebrate the Eucharist in his presence until he had done penance. The emperor submitted publicly. The episode, often painted by artists, has remained the symbol of a Christian conscience that does not bow before absolute power.



Saint Ambrose barring Theodosius from the church, by Rubens (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

The poet of hymns

Ambrose composed simple, strong hymns in four-line stanzas, easy for the people to sing. Several are recognized as authentic because contemporaries such as Augustine attribute them to him: *Aeterne rerum conditor* for dawn, *Deus creator omnium* for evening, *Iam surgit hora tertia*, and *Veni redemptor gentium* for Christmas. They served as a model for all Latin hymn writing. The Ambrosian Rite, proper to the Archdiocese of Milan, still bears his name.

The death of Ambrose

Ambrose died in Milan during the night of April 3 to 4, 397, on Holy Saturday, after praying for a long time with his arms stretched out in the form of a cross. He was buried in the basilica he had built for the martyrs, today the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, beside the bodies of Saints Gervasius and Protasius.

Why is Saint Ambrose the patron saint of beekeepers?

An ancient legend, told by his biographer, says that bees settled on his lips when he was a baby in his cradle, a sign of his future eloquence. That is why he is the patron saint of beekeepers, and by extension of candle makers. He is also the patron of Milan, where his feast is a great civic and religious holiday.

More deeply, Saint Ambrose shows that a man of power can become a servant. Called against his will, he gave himself entirely to his people, feeding them with the Word, defending the poor and resisting the powerful. Catholics pray to him for bishops and leaders, for preachers and catechists, and for all who must stay faithful to their conscience.

To pray with him, read his hymn "O God, Creator of All Things", or follow the novena to Saint Ambrose, from November 28 to December 6, the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Ambrose in art

- **Bishop's vestments**: he is shown with miter and crosier, as one of the four great Latin Doctors of the Church.
- **The beehive**: a reminder of the bees on his lips and of his "honeyed" eloquence.
- **The scourge or whip**: a sign of his firmness against heresy and injustice.
- **A book**: as a Doctor of the Church and a commentator on Scripture.
- **The scene with Theodosius**: the bishop barring the emperor from the church, painted by Rubens and Van Dyck.



Saint Ambrose of Milan, church stained glass or statue.

Where to pray to Saint Ambrose

- **Milan**: the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, where he rests in the crypt.
- **Milan**: the Duomo, cathedral of the archdiocese that still follows the Ambrosian Rite.
- **Trier** (Germany): his birthplace, a former imperial capital.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Santi Ambrogio e Carlo on the Via del Corso, church of the Lombard community.

PRAYER

Hymn of Saint Ambrose "O God, Creator of All Things"

Saint Ambrose is one of the few Fathers of the Church whose prayers we still sing: his hymns, composed in Milan at the end of the fourth century, were taken up by the whole Latin liturgy. The *Deus creator omnium*, an evening hymn, is one of those whose authenticity is most certain, since Saint Augustine quotes it in the *Confessions*. Below you will find this text, followed by an original prayer to Saint Ambrose.

"O God, Creator of All Things" (Deus creator omnium)

Ambrose gives thanks for the day that is ending and for the rest of the night. Translated from the Latin by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *O God, Creator of all things, Ruler of the heavens, you who clothe the day with lovely light and the night with the grace of sleep,*
>
> *so that rest may restore our weary limbs for work, lift up our tired minds and loosen the grip of anxious sorrow:*
>
> *now that the day is done, we give you thanks, and as night rises we pray; bound to you by our vows, we sing this hymn, asking for your help.*
>
> *Let the depths of our hearts sing to you, let our ringing voices praise you, let our chaste love cherish you, let our sober minds adore you.*

Source: Saint Ambrose, hymn *Deus creator omnium*, stanzas 1 to 4. The first two are quoted by Saint Augustine in the *Confessions*, Book IX, chapter 12, where he tells how they brought him comfort after the death of his mother.

Another hymn to meditate on

> *"Eternal Maker of the world, who rule the night and the day, and give the seasons their times to lighten our weariness."*

Source: Saint Ambrose, morning hymn *Aeterne rerum conditor*, first stanza, translated by Saintspedia. It is still sung at Morning Prayer (Lauds) in the Liturgy of the Hours.

Prayer to Saint Ambrose

> *Saint Ambrose, you who were called by the voice of a child and the cry of a whole people, teach me to recognize God's call, even when it overturns my plans.*
>
> *You who gave your goods to the poor and opened your door to everyone, make me welcoming and generous. You who fed your people with the Word of God, give me a love for Scripture and for silent prayer.*
>
> *You who knew how to say no to the powerful when justice was at stake, give me the courage to follow my conscience, with respect but without fear. I entrust to you bishops, priests, catechists and all who hold responsibility in society.*
>
> *You who led Augustine to baptism, I entrust to you all who are searching for God, and my own intention: (name it in silence). And may I, like you, sing the praise of the Creator every day. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Ambrose is celebrated on December 7, the anniversary of his ordination as bishop in 374, during the season of Advent. His hymn *Deus creator omnium* is especially suited to evening prayer, before going to sleep. The prayer to Saint Ambrose fits well before a homily or a catechism class, or when you must make a difficult choice of conscience. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Ambrose, and read the life of Saint Ambrose.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Ambrose of Milan

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Ambrose and the testimony of Saint Augustine. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on November 28; it ends on December 6, the day before his feast on December 7, in the heart of Advent. It can also be prayed at any time of year, for a bishop or a priest, for a catechumen preparing for baptism, or for a decision of conscience.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. Ambrose loved to have his people sing: if you can, end with a hymn or a psalm. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

Day 1: An unexpected call

Ambrose was a governor, not yet baptized, when the crowd acclaimed him bishop. God sometimes calls where we least expect it. Ambrose tried to escape, but in the end he trusted that the call was truly from God.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to your calls, even unexpected ones. Give me the confidence to say yes.

Today: In a moment of silence, ask God what He expects of you today.

Day 2: Giving everything

Once he became bishop, Ambrose gave his goods to the poor and to the Church. He did not want to serve two masters. His new life began with a concrete gesture of detachment.

Prayer: Lord, free me from attachment to what I own. May my goods serve those who need them.

Today: Make a donation to a charity that helps the poorest.

Day 3: Listening to the Word

Augustine often found Ambrose reading Scripture in silence. All his preaching came from that listening. Before speaking about God, he took time to let God speak to him.

Prayer: Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. May your Word become my daily bread.

Today: Slowly read the Gospel of the day and keep one sentence with you.

Day 4: An open door

At Ambrose's house, anyone could come in without being announced. The bishop was available to all, the great and the humble alike. His open door was a sign of an open heart.

Prayer: Lord, make my heart and my home welcoming. Let no one feel unwanted in my presence.

Today: Welcome patiently someone who disturbs you.

Day 5: The captives

To ransom prisoners, Ambrose had the sacred vessels melted down. He explained that the Church owns gold not to keep it, but to bring help. For him, living people were worth more than precious objects.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you prisoners, hostages and all who are deprived of freedom. Give them hope and justice.

Today: Pray for someone in prison, or support a ministry that visits prisoners.



The Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, where the saint rests.

Day 6: Singing in the trial

Shut in the basilica with his people while soldiers surrounded it, Ambrose had them sing hymns. Song sustains courage. The faithful who might have given in to fear found strength in praising God together.

Prayer: Lord, when trials come, put a song of trust on my lips. May my praise be stronger than my fear.

Today: Sing or listen to a hymn, for example an Advent hymn.

Day 7: The courage of truth

After the massacre of Thessalonica, Ambrose asked Emperor Theodosius to do penance. He told the truth to the most powerful man in the world. And the emperor, moved by that truth, humbled himself before God.

Prayer: Spirit of fortitude, give me the courage to speak the truth with charity, even when it costs me.

Today: Pray for those who govern, that they may serve justice.

Day 8: Accompanying a seeker

Ambrose did not force Augustine: he welcomed him, preached and prayed. Then he baptized him. There is a time for sowing and a time for harvest, and both belong to God.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those who are seeking the faith. Place patient and radiant witnesses on their path.

Today: Pray by name for someone who is searching, or for the catechumens preparing for baptism.

Day 9: Arms outstretched

At the end of his life, Ambrose prayed for a long time with his arms stretched out in the form of a cross. He died on Holy Saturday, turned toward the Resurrection. The man who had sung so often of the light that follows the night went to meet the dawn of Easter.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Ambrose, keep me faithful to the end, in the hope of Easter. Amen.

Today: Pray for a moment with your arms open, offering your life to God.

Closing prayer

Saint Ambrose, courageous shepherd and poet of praise, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for the Church, for her bishops and for all who are searching for God. Obtain for us a generous heart, a truthful word

and a life that sings the glory of the Creator. Amen.

You may end this novena by praying or singing his evening hymn, *Deus creator omnium*, or the Advent hymn attributed to him, *Veni redemptor gentium*, known in English as "Savior of the Nations, Come."

To go further, read the life of Saint Ambrose and his hymn "O God, Creator of All Things".

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Ambrose in Milan, Tomb of the Saint

The Basilica of Saint Ambrose, Sant'Ambrogio in Italian, is one of the oldest and most venerable sanctuaries in Milan. Founded by Saint Ambrose himself in the late 4th century, it houses his tomb, between those of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius. Its Romanesque architecture became the model for many churches in Lombardy.

The Basilica of the Martyrs

Ambrose had this church built outside the walls of the Roman city, in a cemetery where martyrs lay buried. He consecrated it in 386, after discovering the bodies of Saints Gervasius and Protasius, which he placed beneath the altar. He wished to be buried there himself, and there he was laid to rest in 397. The church later took his name. In the 9th century a community of Benedictine monks settled beside it, followed by canons, and the building was rebuilt in the 11th and 12th centuries in its present form.



The Basilica of Saint Ambrose in Milan.

A Masterpiece of Lombard Romanesque

You enter through a spacious atrium surrounded by arcades, which leads to a brick facade with two levels of loggias, flanked by two bell towers from different periods. Inside, the nave, with its rib vaulting, is one of the oldest in Europe. Beneath the ciborium stands the Golden Altar, a masterpiece of Carolingian goldsmithing signed by the master Volvinius in the 9th century, which tells the story of the life of Christ and of Ambrose. The apse preserves a large mosaic, and the small chapel of San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, reached from the nave, keeps a 5th-century mosaic portrait of Ambrose, one of the oldest known.

The Crypt and the Tomb

In the crypt, beneath the main altar, the remains of Saint Ambrose, clothed in his bishop's vestments, rest in a single shrine between those of Saints Gervasius and Protasius. This is the heart of the pilgrimage. The people of Milan come down to pray here, especially around December 7, the feast of their patron.

Praying at the Tomb of Saint Ambrose

Before your visit, you might reread the life of Saint Ambrose, or the pages of the *Confessions* where Augustine tells of his baptism. Once there, a time of silence in the crypt is a good moment to entrust an intention to the saint, for example for the leaders of the Church or for someone who is searching for God. His hymn "God, Creator of All Things" fits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other Places Associated with Saint Ambrose

- **Milan**: the Duomo, the cathedral of the diocese, beneath which you can see the remains of the baptistery of San Giovanni alle Fonti, where tradition places the baptism of Augustine.
- **Milan**: the Basilica of San Nazaro and the Basilica of San Simpliciano, foundations dating from Ambrose's time.
- **Trier** (Germany): his birthplace, with its monuments from the imperial era.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saints Ambrose and Charles on the Via del Corso.

Practical Information

The basilica is in the center of Milan, near the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, and is served by the Sant'Ambrogio metro station. December 7, the feast of Saint Ambrose, is a public holiday in Milan, and solemn

celebrations are held in the basilica. Check Mass and visiting times with the parish before you come.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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