SOME REMARKS ON AMBROSE’S POLITICAL THEOLOGY

No doubt that Thessaloniki is the right place to deal with some aspects of Ambrose’s political theology. Every scholar of Ancient Christianity has in mind the image of the bishop preventing Emperor Theodosius from entering Milan Cathedral after the massacre of Thessalonica and rebuking him for what he had done (or better: for what he had permitted to be done), as painted by Rubens, van Dyck and many others 1, but also celebrated in theological treatises as a sign of the triumph of the Church over an unjust political power – not least by Reformed theologians.

In the last decades, however, the view on that episode has deeply changed and Ambrose’s role in late antiquity politics has been more generally questioned by scholars, especially since Neil McLynn’s influential monograph Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital appeared in 1994 2: in his pages, Ambrose is no longer the Church hero penned by ecclesiastical historiographers like Sozomenus or Theodoretus, but only a cunning and ambitious courtier who, after the Thessalonica affaire, tries to save his Emperor from criticism and to transform the impending disaster into a spectacular propagandistic triumph – McLynn defines Ambrose as Theodosius’ “impresario” in that circumstance, using the exact Italian theatrical term 3.

Moreover, Ambrose has been reproached for his heavy

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interventions in political and administrative matters pertaining to the civil power, as in the case of the Synagogue of Callinicum or the Altar of Victory in the Senate House in Rome. In these cases, Ambrose would have abused of his role, by extending his authority out of the legitimate boundaries between ecclesiastical and political domains and revealing a hierocratic attitude in contrast to traditional Roman tolerance. In doing so, scholars focused their attention on these and other episodes, rightly considering Ambrose as a Church leader and activist more than a pure thinker or a political philosopher⁴.

In this way, however, they underestimate other episodes – one above all: Ambrose's strong protestation against Priscillianus' execution – and omit to collect and deepen the bishop's reflections on secular politics and its autonomy scattered in his writings, which, in my opinion, can help us not only interpreting his way of acting but also reconstructing a body of ideas which delineates a coherent political theology, if we would like to make use of a up to date vocabulary. Of course, it is not possible to exhaust here the topic or locate adequately Ambrose's thought within the largest tradition of classical political philosophy; for instance, I will not deal with Ambrose's republicanism or his conception of the original communism of mankind. But I hope I could offer a more nuanced and balanced presentation of his general conception, which inspired him in his actual action within the late antique political context.

Like for all the ancient Christian theologians, also for Ambrose reflecting on political power implies to face the intimation contained at the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of Paul's epistle to Romans (13.1), according to which every soul must be subdued to the superior powers (ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις in the Greek text, sublimioribus potestatibus in the Latin Vulgata),

interacted as indicating the political authorities. Like for Irenaeus before him, the occasion for a thorough exegesis of the Pauline text is offered to Ambrose by the narrative of the second temptation of Jesus in the desert, when the Devil says “I will give you all this power and their splendour, for it has been handed over to me, for me to give it to anyone I choose” (Lk 4:6). Ambrose dealt with this episode in the fourth book of his *Expositio in Lucam*. The offer by the Devil seems opposed to the statement of Paul, according to which every power comes directly from God (Rm 13:1: *Omnis potestas a Deo* in the Latin translation used by Ambrose).

But for Ambrose the contradiction is only apparent, because the demoniacal stigma of earthly powers comes from the human *ambitio* (“ambition”) which inevitably accompanies them, since the saeculum, this world, have been posed under the sign of the Evil: *Saeculum in maligno positum est et ordinatio mundi a Deo, opera mundi a malo*. Here, Ambrose depends on Origen’s exegesis to Romans 13, which he surely knew, since the bishop of Milan quotes the origenian commentary in his own epistle probably according to the original Greek text, while we now possess it only in the Latin translation by Rufinus.

Commenting Paul’s key statement that every power comes from God (Rm 13:1), Origen compares the worldly *potestas* to the five senses which everybody can use both for a good sake or a bad one. Political rulers must use responsibly their power to be not condemned in the last judgement. Both *subjection* and *potestas* are placed in the exercise of human free will; both they pertain to the sphere of human soul, according to Origen’s threefold anthropology which distinguishes between the lower component of the human compound (σάρξ, “flesh”), and the upper one, (πνεύμα,

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5 For the history of the exegesis of this pericope in Ancient Christianity, see M. Rizzi, *Cesare e Dio. Potere spirituale e potere secolare in Occidente*, Bologna 2009 (for Ambrose see especially pgs 78-88).


7 In the Latin political vocabulary the term ambitio had a technical meaning, indicating the action of going in search for votes (*amb-ire*).


“spirit”), with the soul (ψυχή) as the decisive place where human free will can direct itself towards spiritual realities or fleshy ones. In such a scheme, Origen links Paul’s statement to the episode of the tribute requested to Jesus by the Pharisees in Mt 22:21 and affirms that the human soul must be subdued to secular powers as long as it is engaged in earthly activities, or, using a metaphor close to the gospel words, has a debt with Caesar, as signified by the superscriptio Caesaris, i.e. the inscription of Caesar on the coin shown to Jesus.

Those who are not yet entirely pneumatic beings – and only Christ and maybe his disciples were completely free from any worldly commitment –, bring on themselves such an inscription and for this reason are requested by the Lord himself to render to Caesar the tribute, which consists in obedience to secular powers. Origen, however, does a step further, by operating with an exegetical audacity which will have no equal for long. Indeed, he determines a domain of specific jurisdiction for the political potestas, by observing that authority is God’s servant (Rm 13:4) because the Apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have set only religious duties in the synod of Jerusalem (Acts 15); there, they did not issue to the Christians any specific prohibition of theft, murder or any other crime, since these were and are already punished by human laws.

Therefore, Origen assigns to the secular power a specific function to assure respect of the lex naturae, the natural law inscribed into the worldly realm, while the moral law implied in the Christian revelation pertains only to the spiritual and intelligible religious world; Christians’ duty is to direct their free will towards obedience to human and divine laws; only in case the former would contrast with the latter, Christians can disobey, at the cost of their life, too, if necessary.

Also in Ambrose’s attitude towards political authority,

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12 Orig. Com. Rom. 9.28.
13 Orig. Com. Rom. 9.26. The biblical reference for Origen’s statement is Peter’s saying: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29). I have dealt at large with Origen’s exegesis of Romans in Rizzi Cesare e Dio, pgs 64-73.
human free will is at stake: there is no guilt in the power itself, but only in those who wield it; by no means is God’s order incorrect, but actually is the conduct of those who administer it, to be inadequate.\footnote{Ambr. Exp. Luc. 4.29.}

But Ambrose introduces a slight change into Origen’s exegesis and, to some extent, also into Paul’s statement, by affirming that only who makes a correct use of secular power can be defined as minister Dei, “servant of God”. But the Pauline text (Rm 13:4) defines as such everybody who exercise earthly power, apart from any ethical evaluation of their acting, as far as God has established them as a protection for good people from evil. Origen had refined this idea by making reference to the concept of natural law, to the protection of which the action of the earthly potestas must be tightly bound. Ambrose instead restricts the definition of “servant of God” only to those who exercise secular power properly: such a limitation is particularly significant in the context of the post-Constantinian Empire, since it restricts the growing tendency to exalt the sacred and ministerial dimension of rulers, conceived even more as a direct expression of God, since they are largely Christian, now. Furthermore, Ambrose’s distinction between divine order and human use, ordinatio and opera, retains the political power in the context of its historical concreteness, which can be always judged and criticized, because its evaluation does not pertain to the things of God.

Ambrose’s key text on political matters is his Sermo contra Auxentium, in which he explains his behaviour during the Basilica conflict in 386\footnote{The Sermo contra Auxentium has been transmitted as an appendix to a letter from Ambrose to Emperor Valentinian II (Ambr. Epist. 10.75a); I make reference to it simply as Sermo contra Auxentium. The bibliography on the conflict is extensive; for recent studies, see M.L. Coolish, “Why the Portiana? Reflections on the Milanese basilica crisis of 386”, Journal of Early Christian Studies 10, 2002, pgs 361-371, and the bibliography recorded there.}. In that period, the church of Milan and the entire Christian empire were being lacerated by the conflict between the supporters of the Nicene Creed and the Arians. In this conflict, dogmatic issues and concrete political vicissitudes intertwined, if one considers that after Constantine the ideal of
religious unity did become one of the ideological features which characterized the Empire\textsuperscript{16}. As is well known, on the occasion of the Easter celebrations of the year 386, the Milanese court of the Emperor Valentinian II, still a child, demanded in the name of the supreme power of the Emperor a chapel where the Arian bishop Auxentius could officiate at the Arian rite.

To prevent the seizure of one of the Catholic basilicas of Milan, Ambrose and his flock barricaded themselves in it, surrounded by a cordon of soldiers, who refused, however, to intervene with violence. The bishop came out as the winner in this confrontation – or so he represents himself. But, beyond the actual course of the events, in the \textit{Sermo contra Auxentium} Ambrose paints at best his political theology, by responding to the charges moved against him. Facing the Emperor’s order to retreat and give him access to, and use of the basilicas, Ambrose follows again Origen’s exegesis to Romans, by introducing the episode of the tribute of Mt. 22:21 to illustrate to what extent a bishop has to obey to political authorities in matters of faith.

But unlike Origen, Ambrose does not focus on the inscription (\textit{superscriptio}) of the coin given to Jesus in the Gospel episode, but on the figure (\textit{imago}) on it; since both were quoted in the scriptural passage\textsuperscript{17}, one may wonder if Ambrose’s choice to deal with this specific particular, is directly connected with Roman traditional praxis, according to which the Emperor’s image received honours and represented him \textit{in absentia}, for instance during judicial activities\textsuperscript{18}. In any case, the \textit{imago} on the coin offers to Ambrose the opportunity to reject the charges


\textsuperscript{17} Mt 22:20: “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, shortly after Ambrose's time, became a common practice placing Emperors' images within the churches: see for instance Opt. Mil. C. Don. 3.12. On this topic, see the classical study of H. Kruse, \textit{Studien zur offiziellen Geltung des Kaiserbildes im römischen Reich}, Paderborn 1934, pgs 105f. for the episode reported by Optatus of Milevis.
moved against him in theological and ecclesiological terms:

So, too, I say to those who oppose me: Show me a penny. Jesus sees Cesar's penny and says: Render unto Cesar the things that are Cesar's, and unto God the things that are God's. Can they in seizing the basilicas of the church offer Cesar's penny? But in the church I only know of one Image, that is the Image of the unseen God, of Which God has said: “Let us make man in Our image and Our likeness” (Gn 1:26); that Image of Which it is written, that Christ is “the Brightness of His glory and the Image of His Person” (Heb 1:3). In that Image I perceive the Father, as the Lord Jesus Himself has said: “He that seeth Me seeth the Father” (Jo 14:9). For this Image is not separated from the Father, which indeed has taught me the unity of the Trinity, saying: “I and My Father are One” (Jo 10:30).

Therefore, the image of Christ, the God-man, is the only permissible in the church, as it constitutes the image of the invisible; in no way the imago imperatoris can find space within the church. Ambrose explains what this does in practice mean from two points of view. On the one hand, it relates to the use of church funds; he does not deny that they may be lawfully required by the political power, even if they are originally intended to support the poor people, because they would always be part of the taxes, even extraordinary, which both Jesus and Paul had affirmed are to be paid.

On the other hand, however, Ambrose develops an unexpected and more significant argument. In fact, the bishop of Milan links the theme of the tribute and the defense of the basilicas to what he considers the specific function of the bishop's office, which is teaching (docere). More specifically, Ambrose defends the particular shape and effectiveness of his episcopal teaching, which was criticized by those who argued that people had been misled by the spell cast on them by the hymns composed by him and sung by the faithful during the siege of the basilicas, according to the liturgical use of the Eastern churches. The bishop does not deny the fact, indeed raises the stakes, and states

20 In the so called episode of the tribute in Capharnaum (Mt 17:24-27).
22 Ambr. Serm. c. Aux. 33.
23 See the famous narrative of the episode in Augustine (Conf. 9.6.14).
that it was the greatest enchantment of all, which made possible
the solemn confession of the Trinity by the whole flock: by singing
hymns, the faithful learned to praise in verses the Father, the Son
and the Holy Spirit: “So they all have become teachers, who
scarcely could be disciples”\textsuperscript{24}; the uncultivated Milanese Christians
can now be teachers, because they are conformed to the image and
the teaching of the Logos (\textit{Verbum}), of which the Church is
upholder and trustee.

Having thus stated the reversal of the normal social and
cultural hierarchies which takes place within the liturgical space
of the church, Ambrose concludes his reflection on the episode of
the tribute to Caesar in chapter 21 of Matthew’s Gospel. He
affirms that there can be no greater obedience than to follow the
example of Christ, and also the application on the part of the
bishop of the principle stated in that episode must be located in
that framework. So, for Ambrose the tribute pertains to Caesar,
and cannot be refused, but the church pertains to God, and
must not be handed over to Caesar, because the temple of God cannot
fall within the rights of Caesar in no case\textsuperscript{25}.

On such a background, Ambrose’s explicit denial of the
legitimacy of a peculiar image assigned to the emperor in the
church reveals its full extent\textsuperscript{26}. It is clear that Ambrose is refuting
a charge that is both political – the imperial rights over any
building and specifically over that basilica – and, at the same time,
thelogical – the Arians’ refusal of the ontological identity of the
Trinity’s Persons.

For Ambrose, Emperor Valentinian cannot claim any space
for worship - and in particular that church -, because the image
which he shows for obtaining the basilica, is distorted, as the
image of Christ proposed by his Arian faith. Indeed, in this there
is more than a claim for a mere exemption of the Church from the

\textsuperscript{24} Ambr. \textit{Serm. c. Aux.} 34.
\textsuperscript{25} Ambr. \textit{Serm. c. Aux.} 35.
\textsuperscript{26} Eusebius of Caesarea was the first to speak of the Emperor as image (\textit{eikón}) of the
Logos (on this topic, see in short Rizzi, \textit{Cesare e Dio}, pgs 73-76 for a short
treatment; the reference study is still R. Farina, \textit{L’impero e l’imperatore cristiano
in Eusebio di Cesarea. La prima teologia politica del cristianesimo}, Zürich 1966.
See here \textit{infra}, about this idea in the so called Ambrosiaster.
intromission of the political power; Ambrose’s view rests not on strictly legal or political arguments, but rather on the conviction that in the Church, to some extent, distinctions among men according to earthly criteria are already being lessened, so that can become masters even those who could hardly be disciples elsewhere:

For the Milanese bishop, in the Church every man regains its original condition as a icon of God by restoring in himself the right image of the Logos according to which he has been created. In Ambrose’s view, the physical space of the church represents the symbolic domain which refers to another space: that of the heavenly church of the Logos, icon of the invisible, who is present in his visible church gathered in prayer, as well as the invisible deity was present in the visible human body of the incarnate Christ.

In this light, the notorious statement which closes Ambrose’s sermon can acquire a very different meaning from which is conferred on it by most historiography: “For the Emperor is within the Church, not above it (imperator intra ecclesiam, non supra ecclesiam est). For a good emperor seeks the aid of the Church and does not refuse it” 27. The first phrase is normally understood as signifying the necessary subduing of the Christian Emperor to the ecclesiastical power. This assessment is probably affected by other famous incidents between the bishop of Milan and the political authority, already mentioned at the beginning of this paper. In fact, these initiatives on the part of Ambrose appear to have been determined by the specific contingencies within which they took place; in this case, instead, we are in front of Ambrose’s most detailed reflection on a theological and exegetical basis which seems to me to be coherent with the traditional view after Constantine, which wanted Emperors and bishops to cooperate for the welfare of the Christian Empire, as Ambrose remarks in the second half of the phrase, which seems to me underestimated by modern historiography.

We can realize the exact meaning and importance of the previous statement (“In the church I only know of one Image”) also for the understanding of Ambrose’s conception on the position of

27 Ambr. Serm. c. Aux. 35.
the Emperor within the church only by situating the bishop’s teaching in its precise historical context. Just a few years before the Basilica conflict, in Pope Damasus’ Rome a commentary on Paul’s epistles was composed by an anonymous author, now designated as Ambrosiaster, who introduced in the exegesis of Romans 13:3 a note which was to change the course of Western political theology. According to Ambrosiaster, “the Apostle calls prinicipes (Rom. 13:3) those rulers who are created to improve human life and to prohibit the contrary, bearing in themselves the image of God, so that all the people be submitted to one”.

Eusebius was the first who attributed the status of divine icons (more exactly, of icon of the Logos) to emperors and bishops, so modifying the traditional Alexandrian theology which considered every man created κατ’ εἰκόνα of God. For Eusebius, the two icons had historically coincided in Constantine, but in Eusebius’ thought and in the subsequent Byzantine political theology, the Origenian legacy has determined their respective boundaries, so that the two authorities had more reasons to cooperate than to conflict – at least on a theoretical level. But as can easily see, Ambrosiaster transposes the eusebian concept quite awkwardly, because the idea that the sovereign brings within himself the image of God should be better related to the previous verses (where Paul states the principle that every power comes from God, Rom 13:1-2), rather than here.

So, in his *Sermo contra Auxentium*, Ambrose seems to come back to the original point of view of the Alexandrian tradition, by refusing any particular status both to Emperors and bishops, as earthly representatives of the image of God. In Ambrose’s view, only the invisible Logos can be above the ecclesia visibilis (“the visible church”), who functions as an intermediary between visible and invisible and is able to make every man, who brings His image within himself, a master; for this reason, the Emperor can vindicate in front of the church no other right than the paying of the earthly tribute, which corresponds to his

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29 “Magistrates bring fear not to those who do good, but to those who do evil.”
primacy in the field of secular affairs, but without any pretence on what pertains to the religious domain.

In his exegesis of the episode of the tribute in Matthew’s Gospel, instead, Ambrosiaster was moving in a different direction in respect to Eusebius and Ambrose. In both them, Mt 22 functions as a limit to an excessive extension, when applied to a Christian Emperor, of the Pauline statement according to which every power comes from God. In Eusebius’ and Ambrose’s exegesis, the stress falls on the duty to reserve to God what is proper to God, while to Caesar is reserved only the worldly payment. On the contrary, in Ambrosiaster’s vision the distinction between Caesar and God multiplies the effects of Paul’s statement in Romans 13, confirming the direct provenance from God of the political power, without any ethical or jurisdictional restraint, as in the case of Ambrose:

The Apostle commands to pay tributes in order to demonstrate submission and to understand not to be free, but to live under authority which comes from God. They must submit themselves to their ruler, who acts in the place of God, as prophet Daniel says: “The Most High gives the kingdom to whom he will” (Dan. 4:22, 29; 5:21); in the same way also the Lord: “Render unto Cesar...”. So, they must submit to their ruler as to God: and the proof of their submission consists in paying taxes.

By associating a quotation from the Old Testament with the Gospel episode of the tribute, Ambrosiaster connects the subjection to the political authorities stated in Romans 13 with the mosaic horizon, in which political laws and religious laws coincided. According to Ambrosiaster, Paul was able to announce that the law is fulfilled in love, only under the condition that the commandments of the Decalogue are still valid. We are far away from Origen’s view, according to which in the new economy of the Gospel, the precepts of the church must be referring only to the religious dimension of life. In his turn, Ambrose operates in a historical period when the church has acquired an institutional and public dimension which compels bishops to interact with

secular powers in articulated and complex forms, unimaginable at Origen’s time. The Milanese bishop accepts the Eusebian ideal of the necessary cooperation between bishops and Emperors, which can result sometimes troubled, but never antagonistic, since he follows Origen in tracing a separation between the jurisdiction of the political authority over the visible realm and of the church over the invisible one, as seen above. Even invoking the intervention of the secular power, Ambrose always admits that the law making and administration of justice pertain to the political potestas, on which the bishop can intervene by means of persuasion or other forms of pressure, but not by means of a direct exercise of his own authority32.

But in any case he considers neither the bishops nor the Emperor as direct representatives of God. This delicate balance maintained by Ambrose appears as already broken in the commentary of Ambrosiaster, who develops his own theological conception of the imago in another work of his, the Questiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti, which circulated in the Middle Ages under Augustine’s name. Commenting on the episode of the first book of Samuel, when David saved the life of King Saul, even though he had moved away from the path of God, Ambrosiaster justifies David’s behaviour on the basis of Romans 13 and on the principle that power comes directly from God, so that is not licit to overturn it whatever the case; his conclusion is striking: Ambrosiaster affirms that “the king bears God’s image and the bishop Christ’s one”, so that the former could be defined as vicarius Dei, and the latter as vicarius Christi33. Only by placing Ambrose’s view within the context of the political theology of his days, it becomes possible to understand the exact meaning of his statement about the position of the Emperor “within the church, and not above it”, and the delicate balance he establishes between the autonomy of spiritual affairs and the power of the State.

Ambrose entrusts his political-theological legacy to the discourse for the death of Theodosius, held in February 395.

33 Ambrosiast. Quaest. 35; see also 91: rex adoratur in terris quasi vicarius Dei.
Modern scholarship sees in this text the ideological portrait of the Christian Emperor as painted by Ambrose and stresses the close ties between him and the deceased Emperor, which allow to Ambrose to reappraise, in ideological terms, the historical role played by Theodosius beyond the vicissitudes which did affect their relationship. Throughout the first part, Ambrose's speech revolves around the traditional virtues of the good ruler, reinterpreted in a Christian perspective; they must characterize the devout king; of course, faith (fides) is the first among them, but Ambrose describes skilfully it, interweaving the new religious significance of the term and its Roman traditional meaning, which considers first of all fides as a bond between soldiers and commander (imperator), which must pass seamlessly from Theodosius to his heirs. Only towards the end of the discourse, we can find the decisive point which helps us understand Ambrose's complex argument; it starts from the legendary narrative of the finding of the relics of the Holy Cross by Helen, Constantine's mother, and her decision to insert two Christ's nails in the Emperor's crown and in his horse bridle. Since Plato onwards, the latter represents the brake of justice which must contain the sovereign within the limits of the legitimate exercise of power. Speaking of the nail placed in the crown upon the head of the Emperor, Ambrose breaks up any political theology: "Wisely did Helena act who placed the cross on the head of sovereigns, that the Cross of Christ might be adored among kings. That was not presumption, but piety, since honour was given to our holy redemption."

In Ambrose’ view, the honour, later encoded by the Byzantine ceremonial practice, is not due to the emperor as such, but to the symbol par excellence of the redeeming action of Christ, which lies on his head; the king himself is subdued to it not only metaphorically, given the location of the nail; it is clear that form and reasons for such a tribute can be justified only in relation to a sovereign who accepts to take on the head a similar crown and

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seeks to comply with the obligations which are implied in it, by means of the practice of the virtues, as Theodosius did. In his words, Ambrose does not exalt a Christian king as in the case of Constantine painted by Eusebius, but he exalts a Christian who became sovereign, Theodosius, or a sovereign who became Christian, Constantine; it’s very significant that Ambrose attributes to Elena, a woman, the decisive inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and not to her son. “The Spirit taught her what as a woman she did not know and led her upon a way which no mortal could know... Mary was visited to liberate Eve; Helena was visited that emperors might be redeemed”. In Ambrose’s speech, the Emperors are redeemed, as all the faithful, not elected to a peculiar theological role.

A full examination of Ambrose’s political theology would need a much larger space than is here possible. I hope to have at least clarified that Ambrose’s political considerations stem from a strong theological perspective, deeply rooted in the Alexandrian anthropological conception according to which every man is created κατ’ ἑικόνα of God; for this reason, Ambrose opposes any attempt to assign to the rulers, both Emperors and bishops, a status of special images or representatives of God. On the footsteps of Origen, he can separate with a sharp boundary the domain of the earthly politics from the domain of spiritual affairs; in this way, he can also reaffirm the original equality of mankind, at least within the church, where all the human differences are erased and also the Emperor cannot vindicate a special place: not above the church, but within it (imperator intra ecclesiam, non supra ecclesiam).

Of course, Ambrose was not only a fine theologian, but also a skilled politician, and well trained in courtly affairs during his service as public servant in Sirmio; and he displayed his capabilities and his leadership in defending the position that the church had reached by pacific means after a long period of repression and persecution; but in no way he subordinated his

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37 Ambr. De obit. Theod. 47.
deepest theological beliefs to political opportunities, at the risk of his life then, and of misunderstanding by historians, today.