THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURES BY AMBROSE OF MILAN

1. Introductory Comment

During the first centuries of Christianity, the Fathers of the Western Church, such as Jerome, Hilary, Ambrose and Augustine, tend to spiritually interpret the Holy Scripture, combining the Old with the New Testament, suggesting that Bible passages can be interpreted through a variety of prisms.

Ambrose concentrates on a moral and allegorical-spiritual interpretation, adhering to the principle that the Holy Scripture can reveal to us the mystery of Christ and of Church.

The books of Genesis, the Song of Songs, the Psalms and The Gospel of Luke¹ are the ones that are further explained and analyzed by St. Ambrose.

Saint Ambrose's interpretative activity is mainly of a pastoral nature and is closely associated with his episcopal ministry in Milan, of which he had a profound consciousness. St. Ambrose was more than a competent preacher of the Divine word²; he strongly believed in his holy duty of transmitting the divine commandments to people, and in fact, he defended them in the course of an era characterized by great social, political and ecclesiastical realignments. The interpretation of the Scripture is not an independent undertaking or even a simple venture; on the contrary, it is inseparably connected to the act of worship in the Church. It is valorized by the Eucharistic

congregation, and revealed and enlightened by the holy-spiritual experience.

Ambrose occupies a prominent position in the Christian Latin literature, because he retains a wise balance between the western and the eastern exegetical tradition, especially with that of Alexandria. He devotedly claims that the Scripture is the place of God’s permanent presence. Moreover, through the Scripture, he sees the revelation of the Holy Trinity and God’s lifesaving intervention in history. This conviction led him to pursue the light and the concealed truths in the text, so he could muster some internal strength in order to deal with various pastoral issues.

Saint Ambrose often adopts not only the principles of interpretation, but also the approaches of Philo of Alexandria and of Origen, and he is convinced that each passage of the biblical text can be read on a variety of different levels. He systematically applies the exegetical criteria of the School of Alexandria; specifically the threefold method of approach of Origen, which is: historical, moral and spiritual. By presenting three ways of explanation, he attempts to draw attention to the plurality of meanings in the sacred text. Firstly, there is the literal interpretation, which perceives the simple meaning of true events in a strict sense. Secondly, the moral way which influences Christians’ lives, and finally, the allegorical interpretation, which concentrates on the understanding of God’s mystery and Christ’s presence, hidden underneath the armor of

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4 L. F. PIZZOLATO, *La dottrina esegetica di sant’Ambrogio* [Studia Patristica Mediolanensia, 9], Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1978, 223, 236.

words\textsuperscript{6}. An illustrative example is the image of the walnut tree that Ambrose derives from Origen\textsuperscript{7} concerning the story of a double sin committed by David, that of adultery and of assassination\textsuperscript{8}.

In many cases, especially in the interpretation of the *Psalms*, Ambrose seems to be aware of, and employs to some extent, the approaches of Didymus of Alexandria and of St. Basil the Great\textsuperscript{9}. Thus, the relationship between Basil and Ambrose becomes more obvious in the composition of *Hexameron*. However, the western Father’s *Hexameron* neither lacks originality, nor does it present any servile dependence on the basilian\textsuperscript{10}.

2. Examples of Ambrosian interpretation

Ambrose aims to disclose the deepest meaning of the sacred text, through a typological interpretation of facts or people in the past, under the Christological and ecclesiological prism.

The Scripture is compared to the endless sea, which hides


\textsuperscript{8} 2 Sam 11: 2-17.


its abyssal depths and is fed by sweet and clear rivers. The “sweet and clear rivers” interpretatively mean the purity of the divine message. Furthermore, they mean God’s desire for the salvation of humanity. The “sweet and clear water” that flows represents the speaking that gratifies the soul of the listener with its sweetness of moral commands. These images constitute the deepest meaning of the Holy Scripture, which irrigates the souls with the “spiritual drink”.

The combination of the above concepts and images allows Ambrose to clarify this kind of approach of the Holy Scripture. More explicitly, on the one hand there is a strict to the sense approach, which encloses the apparent sense of the text with an “immediate purity” without any further insights. On the other hand, there is an allegorical approach, which is usually phrased with the term *intellegibilis* referring to the interpretation that transcends literalism. The latter raises two ways of interpretation: the moral and the mystical. In the first instance, the believer tastes the “honey” or the “milk” of moral doctrines and practices the virtues, while in the second he explores the supernatural facts, meaning the acts and the mystery of God and of the hidden Christ, who is present throughout the Scripture.¹¹

St. Ambrose compares the sweetness and nutritional value of honey (Ps 118:103) to the word of God, which addresses the human heart directly, generating feelings of true penance for the committed sins.¹²

He believes that, if the Christians’ life is not watered by the word of God, it dries up. This is because the word of God functions either as rain or snow onto dry soil, or as seeds which cannot sprout and grow, unless they find suitable climate. The same applies to the spiritual life. It remains sterile, if it is not

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well-fed by the Holy Scripture.

Within the same frame of interpretation, Ambrose defines the relationship between the believer and the Scripture according to the image of the person, who goes every day to the well to get water. The image of the well seems to be ambivalent. On the one hand, it represents the “depth” of the Mystery of God; on the other hand, it represents the medium used for the irrigation of the garden of soul. Hence, the well becomes a living spring that contributes to the spiritual transformation caused by the Divine word.

The Holy Father often emphasizes the acatalepsy of many Old Testament passages or even whole books, which creates problems in comprehension and interpretation. However, he considers that the believers, who attempt to approach the texts of the New Testament, are able to penetrate deeper into the meanings of the Old Testament, since Christ leads them to the revelation of the Word and to the plan of salvation. Jesus Christ himself completes this plan and reveals the Old Testament’s hidden spiritual meaning. Nevertheless, this does not absolve the interpreter of tirelessly scrutinizing and loving the Holy Scripture. Finally though, this venture will result in the interpreter’s learning to decipher Scripture’s messages and find the source of the living water in it.\(^{13}\)

The Old Testament is being completed through the New. The former addresses to a crude people and remains ineffective to their redemption and renewal\(^{14}\). Thus, the first Testament assists the second\(^{15}\).

Ambrose considers the Holy Scripture to be the food of the soul that spiritually nourishes and vivifies it. This food is truly diverse, consisting of different genres of literature\(^{16}\). The Law and the Gospel represent the food of adult life, which

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\(^{14}\) L. F. PIZZOLATO, La dottrina esegetica, cit., 49-50.

\(^{15}\) AMBROSE OF MILAN, De interpellatione Iob et David IV, 4, 18 [Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera 4], Roma 1980, 240.

\(^{16}\) L. F. PIZZOLATO, La dottrina esegetica, cit., 28-36.
demands maturity in faith, participation in the Church’s sacramental life and significant interpretative ability, especially for the gloomiest passages of the Scripture. The most tender and palatable parts, regarding their moral value, such as the Psalms and the Song of Songs, better apply to the stage of spiritual development and demand a gradual approach. Hence, he emphasizes the significance of the believers’ abundant nourishing with this heavenly delicacy.

Tasting “the food of heavenly Scriptures (Scripturarum cibos caelestium)” on a daily basis, has the meaning of incessantly supplying their existence with the promise of eternal life, in order to be transformed into the new life of the Gospel, by praising God with their attitude of life. Associating the two Testaments is essential in the gradual process towards maturity in faith. Thus, Ambrose prompts the believers to drink firstly, from the glass of the Old Testament, and then, from the one of the New Testament. Unless they drink from the first one, they cannot drink from the second. They should drink the first, so as to alleviate their thirst, and then they should drink the second to achieve the saturation. However, they ought to drink from both glasses because both of them contain His word and both of them contain Christ who is the life, the peace, the living water and the blood that redeemed us.

In many instances, Ambrose parallels the bread of the Eucharist, which is the offered body of Christ, with the food provided by the Scripture, where the respective biblical text allows a Eucharistic interpretative approach. He combines in his interpretation, the passage of the Proverbs 9:5 with that of the Song of Songs 5:1 concerning the supper served by wisdom (conuiuuium sapientiae). This supper is compared to, and also identified with the Eucharistic supper of the Church (conuiuuium

19 “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed”.
20 “Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!”.
ecclesiae)\textsuperscript{21}. Within this perspective, it is obvious that the Christological doctrine and the ecclesiological aspect complete each other.

Ambrose firstly desires his listeners to understand that they should be directed to the “supper of wisdom”\textsuperscript{22}, if they want to taste the actual bread that satisfies the human’s hunger and drink the intoxicating wine. In this way, they conform to the invitation of the Church expressed through the words in the passages of the Proverbs and the Song of Songs. The believers experience the “intoxicating gratitude” (ebrietas gratiae) because Christ is present and becomes food for us\textsuperscript{23}.

Based on this passage from the Song of Songs, Ambrose locates the “supper of wisdom” and the “supper of the Church” in heaven\textsuperscript{24}. Finally, by referring to the Proverbs 9:1, he declares that the bread consumed in the “house of wisdom” is necessary for our growth, due to the fact that it unites us with Christ.

In another context, interpreting the passage from the Gospel of Luke 11:33\textsuperscript{25}, the Bishop of Milan indicates that the image of the lamp on the stand refers to faith, which is fed by the light of Christ shining in the Church\textsuperscript{26}. In a second interpretative approach, he argues that the light is the word of God, which is demonstrated by the faithful ones and illuminates those who crave to accede to the Church community.

Luke’s passage 11:33 is combined with the Ps 118:105\textsuperscript{27}. Leading, in this context, a person’s steps to the faith of the

\textsuperscript{21} AMBROSE OF MILAN, De Cain et Abel I, 5, 19 [Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera 2/1], Roma 1984, 206 ff.
\textsuperscript{22} E. DASSMANN, La sobria ebbrezza dello spirito. La spiritualità di S. Ambrogio, Vescovo di Milano, Romite Ambrosiane, Sacro Monte di Varese 1975, 153-156, footnote 7.
\textsuperscript{23} AMBROSE OF MILAN, Expositio Psalmi CXVIII XV, 28 [Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera 10], Roma 1987, 158-161.
\textsuperscript{24} AMBROSE OF MILAN, De Cain et Abel I, 5, 19, cit., 206 ff.
\textsuperscript{25} “No one, when he has lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place or under a basket, but on a lampstand, that those who come in may see the light”.
\textsuperscript{26} AMBROSE OF MILAN, Expositionis Evangeli secundum Lucam – Libri VI-XVII, 98 [Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera 12], Roma 1997, 166 ff.
\textsuperscript{27} “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” [Ps 118 (119), 105].
Church, which transmits the light of Christ, the lamp highlights the Christological and ecclesiological content of the ambrosian preaching and interpreting.

The Word of God is the lamp that leads the human’s steps towards the heavenly goods, creating a sense of contempt for everything that is currently existing and earthly, and directing them to a quest of future and invisible goods. His biblical notes reflect the Saint’s conviction that the sacred history can find its spiritual fulfillment in each believer’s life, and that it has an explicit eschatological perspective.

Ambrose’s relationship with the Holy Scripture is romantic and intoxicating. It is a mystical and spiritual relationship that leads to knowledge and to the consolidation with the absolute beauty and sweetness; the consolidation with Jesus Christ. The words of the Scripture satisfy the thirst and invite the believers to a sober spiritual insobriety, an intoxication generated by the believers’ uniting with Christ. According to Ambrose himself: “Let our mind be always with Him. Let it never be removed from His temple and His word. Let it always be occupied with the study of the Scriptures and the prayer, since His word is eternal and practices in us. Hence, as we begin and end each day with Him, praying in church or at home, let the whole course of our life remain securely with Him.”

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30 AMBROSE OF MILAN, De Abraham II, 5, 22 [Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera 2/II], Roma 1984, 156 ff.