

‘FLEAT PRO TE MATER ECCLESIA’: IMAGES OF THE CHURCH IN AMBROSE’S TREATISE ‘DE PAENITENTIA’*

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ABSTRACT

The study is focused on several aspects present in Ambrose’s treatise *De paenitentia*, namely his ecclesiology with respect to the theology and practice of penance. The primary purpose of *De paenitentia* was the confrontation with the heresy of Ambrose’s time when so-called Novatians denied the possibility of penance and absolution for the Christians who committed a serious crime after baptism. Ambrose’s reaction is not only the targeted polemic with this rigorism, but in his treatise, he further develops the structured theology of penance. After a brief historical summary of the roots of Novatian heresy as a reaction to the problem with the *lapsi* who denied the faith during Decius’ persecution, this paper focuses on Ambrose’s arguments in favour of Church as a welcoming place even for sinners. Ambrose uses several biblical images, such as the Good Samaritan, Peter the Apostle, Lazarus, and female figures from the Gospels, to show the value and importance of penance and the role of the Church, who got from Christ the power to ‘bind and loose’. Despite the different practice of penance in the early church, Ambrose’s exegesis and image of the Church as the inn where everybody can be welcomed and cured, no matter in which condition he or she is coming, can serve as an inspiration also for today’s discussion about the character of the Church.

Keywords

Ambrose of Milan; Church Fathers; 4th century; Novatian; Sin; Penance; Repentance

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When facing recent world events about the horrors that those who call themselves Christians are capable of committing, approving of, or ignoring, we sometimes wonder: can even God forgive such things? Even if the perpetrator of such crimes recognises them and repents for the rest of his life? This kind of questioning is not particular for our era, as the same doubts echoed in the ancient church: Even if the merciful God might eventually forgive the sinner who committed a serious crime,¹ should not the Church rather be more careful and exclude the person from its midst indefinitely? If the Church is holy, who has the right to make part of her? To what extent can the Church remain welcoming even towards those who have gravely sinned? And, if the Church does accept them, will this not somehow change her character?

With these questions in mind, in this paper, I want to take a closer look at how Christians in the early centuries confronted these questions and, more specifically, how one of the Church Fathers of the West, St. Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340–397), answered them using biblical analogies. From a brief description of the aftermath of the third-century persecution in the form of the Novatian heresy, I will move to the historical and theological context where Ambrose's work *De Paenitentia* originated. Next, I will focus on the images of the Church in this writing, convinced that a reflection on the ancient approaches of the Church towards the sinners and penance can throw new inspiring light on a similar attitude of the Church of our times towards those who seek pardon for their sins and errors while being denied the communion of the sacraments.

1. Persecution and the Novatian Heresy

One of the most serious transgressions since the early church has been the denial of the faith. There was the problem of approaching

¹ The classification of the deeds perceived by church as serious or mortal sins and their treatment has developed in the first centuries in East and Western part of the empire. Overall, three main areas were considered as serious sins in the early Church: apostasy, adultery and homicide. All three are in this interpretation affected the body: apostasy is the most serious rupture of the Body of Christ – the Church, adultery corrupts human relationships, and killing destroys human life. See Robert Taft, 'Penance in Contemporary Scholarship', *Studia Liturgica* 18, no. 1 (1988): 15, doi: 10.1177/003932078801800102.

numerous apostasies of Christian believers during persecutions, which helped to elaborate the theme of the Church's character and her qualities.

During the first three centuries, in successive periods of persecution, a certain heroic form of Christianity had crystallised. The only true Christian who could have been certain of his or her salvation was the one who stayed firm to his faith even under the threat of the death penalty for the *nomen Christianorum*. Those who broke under the pressure or torture separated themselves from the communion of the body of Christ, who is the Church, and thus could not attain salvation. Apostasy or denial of the faith was thus, from the beginning, a mortal sin which, according to some authors, could no longer be absolved 'on earth'.² However, this rigoristic and, in a sense, elitist perception of a Church of morally robust martyrs and confessors received a major blow in the middle of the third century. Under the massive and well-targeted Decius' persecution, a considerable number of Christians 'have fallen'. Nonetheless, after the worrisome wave of repression had subsided, they desired to rejoin the communion of the Church. This novel reality forced Church leaders to rethink what the qualities of the Church were and whether it was even possible for them to accept back these fallen 'traitors' (*lapsi, traditores*) and returnees. The willingness of many bishops, especially in Rome and Africa, to reconcile the sinners under set conditions was opposed by more rigoristic clerics, who categorically rejected the possibility of penance and forgiveness for such grave sins as apostasy.

Among these, a prominent group advocating a closed-door policy in the middle of the third century were the so-called Novatians, who referred to themselves as 'the pure ones'.³ This claim they strengthened by demanding that those who wished to join them after they had been already baptised in the Catholic Church should be baptised anew. This initiation ritual was intended to purge any stain that the candidate had acquired by belonging to a church consisting of sinners.⁴ The fresh and

² See e.g., Tertullian, *Pud.* 19, 25–26 (SC 394, 260) or Origen, *Orat.* 28, 10 (GCS 3, 381). Tertullian was also one of the first authors who was distinguishing between venial sins and grave mortal sins, such as 'homicide, idolatry, fraud, apostasy, blasphemy, adultery, fornication and all other forms of violation of God's temple'. For the above mortal sins he even did not accept the possibility of penance and absolution mediated by the Church.

³ See Eusebius of Caesarea, *HE* VI 43, 1 (SC 41, 153).

⁴ See Allan D. Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance in the Italian Church of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries: New Approaches to the Experience of Conversion from Sin*,

newly baptised believer was included among the other pure and holy ones, who could no longer sin gravely. According to their understanding, the Church was not a place and means of salvation for sinners, but a limited and elect group of the saved.⁵ Novatians preferred speaking of the Church as a virgin, not a mother.⁶ This image is crucial for tracing the further development of the Church's self-understanding. Groups of Novatians were still surviving in various parts of the Roman empire at the end of the fourth century when their concept of the Church and her attitude towards the sinners was confronted especially by Ambrose of Milan in his treatise *De Paenitentia* (*Concerning Repentance*),⁷ which I will examine next.

2. Ambrose and his treatise *De Paenitentia*

Ambrose's main intention while composing the two books of *De Paenitentia* was clearly the actual need to confront the popular Novatian rigorism and to demonstrate its errors and logical contradictions. However, in his writings, Ambrose does not just present a polemic against the Novatians, as it might seem from the many direct allusions, but he also exhorts and guides his ecclesial community in large parenetic sections.⁸ Throughout his writings, he consistently takes the fundamental stance that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven.⁹ He addresses the Novatians with an accusation that they

make a distinction between sins, some of which you consider that you can loose, and others which you consider to be without remedy. But God does

Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, vol. 15 (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 63f.

⁵ Novatian's soteriology and ecclesiology are analysed in detail by Herrmann Vogt, *Coetus Sanctorum. Der Kirchenbegriff des Novatian und die Geschichte seiner Sonderkirche* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1968), 57–138.

⁶ See Novatian, *Trin.* 29, 9–10. 26 (CCL 4, 70. 72) and more in details Vogt, *Coetus Sanctorum*, 120. Novatian follows here a similar picture at Tertullian, *Pud.* 1, 7–9 (SC 394, 136).

⁷ The date of the writing of the *De paenitentia* is generally dated to the years 389–390, see e.g. Giuseppe Visonà, ed., *Cronologia ambrosiana. Bibliografia ambrosiana* (Roma: Città nuova, 2004), 129f.

⁸ See Ambrose, *Paen.* I 14, 68–77; II 1, 1–5; II 5, 36–11, 107 (CSEL 73, 151–155; 163–165; 178–206).

⁹ See *Paen.* I 2, 5 (CSEL 73, 121).

not make a distinction, He has promised His mercy to all, and granted to His priests the power of absolve without any exception.¹⁰

He does distinguish that some sins are graver than others, but he wants to demonstrate that there is no uncrossable line between them. On the contrary, 'greater sins are washed away by greater weeping' and 'more powerful support is needed on the part of the Church for them'.¹¹ He then accuses the Novatians that they do not exhibit a 'holy fear' but rather an 'insolent presumption' if they despise those who do penance: 'You cannot, forsooth, endure the tears of the weepers; your eyes cannot bear the coarse clothing, the filth of the squalid; with proud eyes and puffed-up hearts, you delicate ones, say with angry tones, "Touch me not, for I am pure".'¹²

Although the usual ancient practice of public repentance from grave sins was laborious and even harsh – even Ambrose would not himself relativise or excuse sin in any way¹³ – yet he understood and strongly reflected on the idea of the Church as a welcoming place for all who would desire to encounter Christ. He, therefore, offered a glance at the Church as a community of the weak and the sick, who all need a Healer, and the Church as a safety haven even for the worst of sinners. This contrasts with the Novatian concept of the Church as a community of morally pure saints who abhor the eventuality of being 'soiled' by interacting with severe offenders. Instead, Ambrose emphasises the communitarian dimension of the Church and the mutual responsibility of the believers for each other. To exhibit these concepts, he offers several Gospel figures and pericopes as the base and symbols of the Church. A prominent role is played here by Peter and female figures.

¹⁰ *Paen.* I 3, 10 (CSEL 73, 124).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Paen.* I 8, 37 (CSEL 73, 137).

¹³ Let's just mention the well-known story of Ambrose requesting penance from emperor Theodosius after the massacre of civilians in Thessaloniki, see e.g. Jean-Rémy Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'empire Romain. Contribution à l'histoire des rapports de l'Église et de l'État à la fin du IV^e siècle* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1933), 227–250.

3. Biblical Images of the Church in *De Paenitentia*

3.1 Peter the Apostle

From the early third century, and especially in the Italian peninsula, the figure of the Apostle Peter began to play a prominent role as a model of a teacher of the fundamentals of the faith. His personage was particularly important in the discussion about the nature of the Church with heretical groups concerning those apostatised during the time of the persecutions. Therefore, biblical images of Peter in various contexts begin to appear more significantly, notably the scene of Peter's denial.¹⁴ The image of Christ, Peter, and the rooster repeatedly appears in many sermons and treatises at this time, as well as in iconography.¹⁵ The reminder that Christ did not only anticipate Peter's denial but also moved him by his sight to the tears of repentance and to conversion made it even clearer to the Church that even the greatest sinners can be encouraged to repentance.¹⁶ Ambrose also often invokes the figure of the apostle Peter as a teacher of faith and as an example of repentance. His exegesis focuses on a particular biblical detail: the voice of the rooster, Jesus' look at Peter, who has just denied him for the third time, and Peter's tears that form the basis for Ambrose's spiritual and theological interpretation of repentance.

Ambrose first contrasts Peter's and Judas' denial: while Peter obtained forgiveness through his tears¹⁷ and chose self-accusation to be justified rather than aggravate the situation by further denial,¹⁸ Judas did not repent and sought pardon not from Christ but from the Jews, and therefore deprived himself of the chance to obtain it.¹⁹ Ambrose explores the image of Peter's denial at the crowing of the rooster especially in the fifth book of his *Hexameron*²⁰ and in his hymn *Aeterne*

¹⁴ See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 92–93.

¹⁵ On the iconography and special significance of sarcophagi with this image, see Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 93–97.

¹⁶ See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 129.

¹⁷ See *Paen.* II 10, 92 (CSEL 73, 199) and also Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* X 88–90 (CCL 14, 371).

¹⁸ See *Exp. Luc.* X 87 (CCL 14, 371).

¹⁹ See *Paen.* II 4, 27 (CSEL 73, 175). In a parallel *Exp. Luc.* X 94 (CCL 14, 372f) Ambrose, however, evaluates Judas' betrayal as the ultimate sin against the Holy Spirit, for which one can no more plead.

²⁰ See Ambrose, *Exam.* V 28, 88 (CSEL 52/1, 201f). The nine-sermon series was preached during Holy Week, when this particular passage fell on Maundy Thursday for the rite of Penitential Reconciliation. See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 164.

Rerum Conditor.²¹ The latter was sung in Ambrose's Milan at the time of the *gallicinium*, the last part of the night when the faithful waited for the dawn at the vigil. The crowing of the rooster announcing the sunrise is a symbol of the coming of Christ into the darkness of sin.²² The 'mystical rooster' (*gallus mysticus*)²³ here is Christ himself, who, by a single glance, drives Peter to recognise his sin and to tears of repentance. For the assembled believers, the crowing of the rooster was not only an imaginative remembrance of an ancient event. In addition, thanks to the physically audible voice of the roosters in the neighbourhood, everyone present could be drawn into the 'today' of the biblical pericope during his or her prayer, when, together with Peter, every believer is reminded of their guilt, and the voice of the 'rooster' Christ announces his forgiveness. The crowing of the rooster represents thus a moment of mercy that brought new hope to the 'sick' with sin who have betrayed Christ in some way in their lives and who had lost their faith.²⁴ Jesus' eyes looking at the believer brought up the tears that washed away the believer's guilt and repaired him or her to life.²⁵ Peter's weeping, then, was not considered just an outward sign of emotions but as his public confession of guilt that would not need any explanation or words.²⁶ For Ambrose, Peter becomes thus an archetype of penance accessible for all Christians. If an apostle could repent even after having denied Christ, then even the worst of apostates share the

²¹ This hymn, and in particular the rooster motif, explores in detail Carl P.E. Springer, 'Of Roosters and "Repetitio": Ambrose's "Aeterne rerum conditor",' *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no. 2 (2014): 155–177, doi: 10.1163/15700720-12341158 and Róbert Horka, 'Hymny *Aeterne rerum Conditor* a *Deus Creator* omnium svätého Ambróza,' *Acta facultatis theologicae Universitatis Comenianae Bratislaviensis* 8, no. 1 (2011): notably on pp. 85–86.

²² See Horka, 'Hymny,' 77f.

²³ *Exam.* V 24, 90 (CSEL 52/1, 203).

²⁴ Hymnus *Aeternae rerum conditor*, vv. 21–24 (SAEMO 22, 32):

*Gallo canente spes redit,
aegris salus refunditur,
mucro latronis conditur,
lapsus fides revertitur.*

²⁵ Hymnus *Aeternae rerum conditor*, vv. 25–29 (SAEMO 22, 32–34):

*Iesu, labantes respice,
et nos videndo corrige,
si respicis, lapsus cadunt,
fletuque culpa solvitur.*

²⁶ See Ambrose, *Ex. ps.* 37, 37 (CSEL 64, 165f); *Exp. Luc.* X 87 (CCL 14, 371). Maxim of Turin, S. 76, 2 (CCL 23, 317) presents the same image of tears as a silent plea for pardon.

hope that they also will be pardoned.²⁷ Ambrose is even convinced that Peter's repentance was more important than his previous faults:²⁸ Peter is present in every believer who weeps over his sins and he is, in fact, the foundation of the Church that seeks Christ's forgiving sight.²⁹

For Ambrose, the image of Peter carries several aspects. Peter himself has achieved the remission of sins by his repentance³⁰ and, on behalf of the Church, he also calls everybody to repentance.³¹ Peter's authority is rooted in the fact that he has been made the foundation of the Church, which would not deny anyone the chance to obtain pardon through repentance, and in the fact that he himself obtained remission of sins for his own betrayal.³² At the same time, Christ conferred on Peter and other apostles the power to bind and loose, and this authority has never been taken from them and their successors. Even Peter, who himself had sinned gravely, could nevertheless obtain pardon by his repentance and tears. And it is on Peter, who experienced his own weakness, that the whole Church stands. This image of Peter's repentance, for Ambrose, reveals clearly that it is repentance that is the source of new life and that it is through repentance that forgiveness can be achieved.³³ But this *exemplum* does not represent the only analogy of the Church used by Ambrose.

3.2 The Good Samaritan and the Physician

While speaking of mercy towards sinners, Ambrose cannot miss the key parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).³⁴ He answers the fundamental question: 'Who is my neighbour?' affirming that a neighbour is a person with whom we are united by mercy and the one who cares for the other. Ambrose insists that everyone is a neighbour without exception, everyone is to be shown mercy, and everyone is to be

²⁷ See Geoffrey W.H. Lampe, 'St. Peter's Denial,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 55, no. 2 (1973): 358, doi: 10.7227/BJRL.55.2.4. But this case has already been used as an argument for the possibility of penance in the Novatian controversy of the mid-3rd century. See (Ps.-) Cyprian, *Ad Novatianum* 8 (CSEL 3/3, 59).

²⁸ See *Exp. Luc.* X 52. 89 (CCL 14, 360; 371); *Exc.* II 27 (CSEL 73, 263).

²⁹ See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 110f.

³⁰ See *Paen.* II 10, 92 (CSEL 73, 199).

³¹ See *Paen.* II 4, 23. 26 (CSEL 73, 173. 174).

³² See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 82.

³³ See *Paen.* II 5, 34 (CSEL 73, 178).

³⁴ See *Paen.* I 6, 27–29; 11, 51–52 (CSEL 73, 132–135; 143–145). Ambrose also develops this parable from Luke 10:30–37 in *Exp. Luc.* VII 71–81 (CCL 14, 237–240).

cared for. In Christ, no one can be called a stranger;⁵⁵ and no one for whom Christ died can be forsaken.⁵⁶ Whoever wants to determine who should be cared for and who should no longer be cared for is even worse than that lawyer who at least asked Christ about it. Not even a seemingly hopeless case can be ignored. The Novatians who have already cut off those who succumbed to pressure during the persecution are just like the priest and the Levite who merely passed by the wounded and half-dead man. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, takes the lost sheep on his shoulders and does not extinguish the smouldering wick; therefore, even a man who is severely wounded is not lost to him.⁵⁷ In this way, he defends the 'fallen ones' (*lapsi*), and he criticises the Novatians who have solved the question of the sinners too quickly:

Does it not seem to you that he who has fallen is half alive if faith sustains any breath of life? For he is dead who wholly casts God out of his heart. He, then, who does not wholly cast Him out, but under pressure of torments has denied Him for a time, is half dead. Or if he be dead, why do you bid him repent, seeing he cannot now be healed? If he be half dead, pour in oil and wine, not wine without oil, that may be the comfort and the smart. Place him upon your beast, give him over to the host, lay out two pence for his cure, be to him a neighbour. But you cannot be a neighbour unless you have compassion on him; for no one can be called a neighbour unless he has healed, not killed, another. But if you wish to be called a neighbour, Christ says to you: 'Go and do likewise.'⁵⁸

The treatment and healing of the sinner has other more symbolic meanings. The Samaritan poured oil and wine into the wounds of the injured man, and Ambrose interprets this image as two ways of healing by the Word: the wine stings the wounds, and the oil softens them. The common situation known by his audience, i.e. that it is necessary to use first oil and then wine, is a way to explain that mercy has to precede severity.⁵⁹ The inn to which the Samaritan brought the wounded is an

⁵⁵ See Eph. 2:19.

⁵⁶ See *Paen.* I 6, 28; 11, 52 (CSEL 73, 133; 144f).

⁵⁷ See *Paen.* I 11, 48 (CSEL 73, 142f).

⁵⁸ *Paen.* I 11, 52 (CSEL 73, 144).

⁵⁹ See *Paen.* I 6, 27; 11, 51 (CSEL 73, 132; 143f); *Exp. Luc.* VII 75 (CCL 14, 239) and more details in footnotes of Roger Gryson, in SC 179, 76–78.

image of the Church.⁴⁰ But if the Novatians refuse to treat the wounded, declaring: ‘We are all healthy and no one will be cured by us,’⁴¹ they are not the Church. The Church not only heals the wounds of sinners with the oil of mercy and the wine of stinging preaching but, like the Samaritan, must also ‘bind’ (*ligare*) or ‘bandage’ (*alligare*) them. In the same way, the ‘binding’ of sin is a ministry of the Church and an act of mercy.⁴²

3.3 Female Figures

Furthermore, Ambrose develops a figurative interpretation of several pericopes where the women play the central role. In the early church, biblical female characters were often used in sermons and writings as figures of the Church, and these roles helped to discover and interpret the Church’s character.⁴³ Thus, in the early three centuries, the anonymous woman in the synoptic Gospels suffering from a bleeding (*haemorrhissa*) who approached Jesus secretly from behind to touch his clothes and was healed⁴⁴ was (along with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1–42) often a symbol of conversion, forgiveness of sins, and healing.⁴⁵ Also, Ambrose compares the Church to this woman, who admits that she is wounded and in need of being healed.⁴⁶ He often then develops the image of sin as a disease or wound and Christ as the Healer. A person suffering from sin seeks a physician to heal him completely, like the woman in the Gospel who has tried many methods and physicians over twelve years. However, the treatment methods of other religions (i.e. pagans and Jews) do not work and cannot bring recovery.⁴⁷ Christ himself is the only true Healer who can cure any disease and absolve any sin.⁴⁸ But He can only heal those who acknowledge their wounds and their need for a doctor.⁴⁹ Just as this woman who touched

⁴⁰ See *Exp. Luc.* VII 78–81 (CCL 14, 240).

⁴¹ *Paen.* I 6, 29 (CSEL 73, 133), see also Cyprian, *Ep.* 55, 16 (CSEL 3/2, 635).

⁴² *Paen.* I 2, 7 (CSEL 73, 122), see also similar passage in *Exp. Luc.* VII 75 (CCL 14, 239).

⁴³ See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 130.

⁴⁴ See also parallel Mt 9:20–21, Mark 5:25–28, Lk 8:43–44.

⁴⁵ See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 130.

⁴⁶ See *Paen.* I 7, 31 (CSEL 73, 134) and *Exp. Luc.* VI 56–59 (CCL 14, 193–195).

⁴⁷ See Ambrose, *E118* XVI 37 (SAEMO 10, 202).

⁴⁸ See *E118* III 23; XVI 36 (SAEMO 9, 146; SAEMO 10, 202), *Paen.* II 3, 19 (CSEL 73, 171) and for more details David Vopřada, *Mystagogie Výkladu 118. žalmu svatého Ambrože* (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2015), 282f.

⁴⁹ See Ambrose, *Ep. extra coll.* 11 (51), 11 (CSEL 82/3, 216).

the garment of Jesus, she is showing the way that even a sinner, desiring forgiveness and recovery, can find Christ and be instantly healed.⁵⁰

Next, Ambrose compares the Church to the woman who has mixed a little yeast into the flour.⁵¹ Here he is interpreting yeast as the hard matter (*materia*) of the Law, which the Church softens with flour, representing the mercy of the Spirit and the redemption of the sinner.⁵² The dough of this yeast and flour is then a representation of the whole body of the Church. In his argument against the Novatians, worried about the contamination by sinners, Ambrose reassures his hearers that, just as a particle of bad leaven cannot corrupt the whole lump, so neither will the presence of sinners in the Church destroy its purity and holiness. However, these are not just the great sinners who might be pointed to as 'those who are corrupting us'. There is a little of the bad leaven in every faithful, so everyone must ask for pardon daily and show mercy to others. It is thus necessary to 'purge out the old leaven, namely, the old man present in each one of us'.⁵³ Against the Novatian practice of excluding sinners from the communion of the Church, Ambrose underlines that by 'purging' the leaven, he does not mean 'casting out' the sinners.⁵⁴ The entire Church bears upon herself all the misery and stain of her children's sins, washing and cleansing them with her pleas and tears, and rejoices in their redemption.⁵⁵

The next female figure whom the Gospel and Ambrose present as the penitent *par excellence* is the sinful woman in the Pharisee's house who came to Jesus, anointed his feet with precious oil, washed them with her tears, and wiped them with her hair.⁵⁶ The tears and the perfumed oil are again a symbol of repentance and the good deeds that all Christians are called upon to do. The perfumed oil stays for the grace of

⁵⁰ See Ambrose, *Is.* 5, 43 (CSEL 32/1, 667) and Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 133.

⁵¹ Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20.

⁵² See *Paen.* I 15, 81–83 (CSEL 73, 157–158), but different exegesis of this parable in *Exp. Luc.* VII 187–194 (CCL 14, 279–282).

⁵³ *Paen.* I 15, 79 (CSEL 73, 156).

⁵⁴ Greek text of 1 Cor 5:7 says ἐκκαθάρατε, i.e. 'clean, purge'.

⁵⁵ See *Paen.* I 15, 79–83 (CSEL 73, 156–158); *Exp. Luc.* VII 208 (CCL 14, 286); *Hel.* 22, 82 (CSEL 32/2, 462).

⁵⁶ This pericope of Luke 7:36–50 is mentioned by Ambrose in *Paen.* II 8, 66–70 (CSEL 73, 190–192). In *Exp. Luc.* VI 14 (CCL 14, 179), he further interprets the parallel text of Mt 26:6–13 (where it is not clear whether it is the same woman) as a figure of the Church pouring the perfumed oil of good works on Jesus' head.

the remission of sins.⁵⁷ In addition, Ambrose compares this woman not ashamed to prostrate herself while kissing Jesus' feet to King David, the ultimate Old Testament model of penance,⁵⁸ and he even holds her up as a better example of love than the Apostle Peter.⁵⁹ No one can compete with the intensity of this woman's love,⁶⁰ and yet, or maybe precisely because of it, her example inspires all who realise their own guilt and desire forgiveness to follow.⁶¹ She, too, is a picture of a Church that loves Christ because she has been forgiven much, unlike Simon the Pharisee, who knows all that is necessary but is lacking in love. The Church is that sinful woman who practices good deeds out of great love and is thus justified.⁶²

Needless to say, Ambrose remains a child of his epoch and his views on women, although similar to that of other patristic authors, are not exactly positive: in fact, today's reader might find them offensive. In Antiquity, a woman was generally perceived as the weaker sex (*sexus inferior*), more inclined to passions and more vulnerable to sin.⁶³ It is, therefore, quite surprising that Ambrose, in the mentioned passages, refers specifically to women as examples to follow. In his reflections on pardon, Ambrose is not only targeting the more 'intellectually sophisticated' male audience but is also trying to involve the present women, i.e. the whole assembly, all the more so since he places these biblical female figures very high on the list and associates them with the entire Church. All, men and women, are equal before God, all need healing and forgiveness, all are a church that calls Christ to come and heal, as in the next scene.

3.4 Lazarus

Right after this episode is another Gospel pericope which Ambrose associates with the concept of forgiveness of sins: the resurrection of Lazarus.⁶⁴ The direct connection between the image of the sinful wom-

⁵⁷ See *Paen.* II 7, 64–65 (CSEL 73, 189–190).

⁵⁸ See *Paen.* II 8, 69 (CSEL 73, 191).

⁵⁹ See *Exp. Luc.* VI 22 (CCL 14, 182).

⁶⁰ See *Paen.* II 8, 68–70 (CSEL 73, 191–192).

⁶¹ See *Paen.* I 16, 90 (CSEL 73, 160); *Exp. Luc.* VI 16–18 (CCL 14, 180); *Hel.* 10, 37 (CSEL 32/2, 434).

⁶² *Exp. Luc.* VI 23 (CCL 14, 182).

⁶³ See e.g. Aude-Sophie Dulat-Gravier, 'Différenciation sexuelle et anthropologie dans la pensée d'Ambroise de Milan,' *RSR* 91, no. 4 (2017): 551–556, doi: 10.4000/rsr.3558.

⁶⁴ Ambrose elaborates it further in his funeral oration over his brother Satyr, see *Exc.* II 77–80 (CSEL 73, 291–293).

an in the Pharisee's house and that of Lazarus is possible because these episodes are also directly related to each other in John's Gospel. However, Ambrose preserves the liturgical structure of these texts, which were read in Milan on the last two Sundays preceding Easter. Lent was both the culminating time of the catechumens' preparation for baptism and the penitents' preparation for reconciliation, so both texts contain a baptismal and a penitential dimension.⁶⁵

Christ will come to your grave, and if He finds there Martha (...) and Mary (...) weeping for you, He will be moved with compassion, when at your death He shall see the tears of many and will say: *Where have you laid him?* (...) I would see him for whom you weep, that he himself may move Me with his tears. I will see if he is already dead to that sin for which forgiveness is entreated. The people will say to Him, *Come and see*. What is the meaning of *Come*? It means, *Let forgiveness of sins come, let the life of the departed come, the resurrection of the dead, let Your kingdom come to this sinner also*. (...) So the Lord Jesus, seeing the heavy burden of the sinner, weeps, for the Church alone He suffers not to weep. He has compassion with His beloved, and says to him that is dead, *Come forth*, that is, 'You who lies in darkness of conscience, and in the squalor of your sins, as in the prison-house of the guilty, come forth, declare your sins that you may be justified. For with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.'⁶⁶

However, for Christ, there is no hopeless case: like the widow of Naim's son,⁶⁷ like Jairus' daughter, even Lazarus, who has been in the grave for days, can be raised from the dead. But this Gospel story also reflects a strong ecclesial dimension. Sin is not just one individual's problem, and remission does not come only through a sinner's efforts. Mary and Martha and other people, as well as the whole Church, mourn the dead and, by their tears, move the Lord Himself.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ See Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 139. In the 4th century, both in Rome and in Milan, a 40-day Lent has already been observed. See *Hel.* 10, 34 (CSEL 32/2, 430); Jerome, *Ep.* 24, 4 (CSEL 54, 216).

⁶⁶ *Paen.* II 7, 54–55. 57 (CSEL 73, 185–187).

⁶⁷ See *Paen.* I 5, 22; II 10, 92 (CSEL 73, 130; 199) and further *Exp. Luc.* V 89–92 (CCL 14, 163–165).

⁶⁸ See *Paen.* II 5, 22; 7, 54–57; 10, 92 (CSEL 73, 130; 185–187; 199) and further *Exp. Luc.* V 92; VII 208 (CCL 14, 164; 286); *Ex. ps.* 37, 10 (CSEL 64, 143f); *Fid.* II 7, 55 (CSEL 78, 75).

Christ ‘loves when a multitude prays for one’;⁶⁹ he alone weeps with the whole Church, has pity on the sinner, and brings him back to life. But in this process, too, the Church has a role to play. Ambrose highlights that while Christ could have done it all himself, he preferred to involve people in the process of forgiveness. And what is more, he handed over to his Church the authority to absolve sins.⁷⁰

He will come and will command that the stone be taken away which his fall has laid on the shoulders of the sinner. He could have removed the stone by a word of command, for even inanimate nature obeys the bidding of Christ. (...) But He bade men remove the stone, in very truth indeed, that the unbelieving might believe what they saw, and see the dead rising again, but in a type that He might give us the power of lightening the burden of sins, the heavy pressure as it were upon the guilty. Ours it is to remove the burdens, His to raise again, His to bring forth from the tombs those set free from their bands.⁷¹

Novatians, who did not accept this participation of the Church in the remission of sins, were equated with the Pharisees who, upset that Lazarus had been resurrected publicly by Christ, sought to kill him. Just as the Pharisees may have felt that it was already too much to raise the dead, the Novatians do not want to deal with those who were once dead and rose again. Ambrose even accuses Novatians of being jealous of God’s mercy,⁷² being like the elder brother of the parable of the Prodigal Son,⁷³ as they refuse to have anything to do with the repentant coming home, declining to enter his father’s house for a feast.⁷⁴

Through these biblical references, Ambrose seeks, above all, to engage the hearer and the reader in a moment of encountering Christ. It is a moment when the Christian believer, along with Peter, recalls his failures under Jesus’ sight, along with the diseased woman approaches Him with faith and longing, along with the sinful woman in the Pharisee’s house, he is not embarrassed to weep openly, and

⁶⁹ *Paen.* II 10, 92 (CSEL 73, 199).

⁷⁰ See *Exam.* I 7, 27 (CSEL 32/1, 26).

⁷¹ *Paen.* II 7, 56 (CSEL 73, 186).

⁷² See *Paen.* II 7, 59 (CSEL 73, 187f).

⁷³ Lk 15:11–32. Ambrose exhorts the pericope in *Paen.* II 3, 13–18 (CSEL 73, 169–171) and wider in *Exp. Luc.* VII 212–243 (CCL 14, 288–297).

⁷⁴ See *Paen.* I 15, 84–85 (CSEL 73, 158–159).

along with Lazarus, he is called to life by Christ even out of the most hopeless situation. Be they great figures of the history of salvation, be they anonymous figures of the opposite character or hypothetical figures from parables, all point in different ways to Christ's power to purify, heal, and resurrect everyone who is guilt conscious and asks for forgiveness.

3.5 Tears

The theme of tears, which in Ambrose's work inseparably accompanies every confession of sin, runs as a red line through the biblical images. It is not only the tears of the penitent, but they are preceded by the tears and pleas of the entire mother Church, who grieves over her wretched children. For Ambrose, the role of the communion of the Church is very important and, in fact, inseparable from the entire process of confession of sins and forgiveness. This has a strong ecclesial aspect for Ambrose; it is never a solely individual and private process. In ancient society, which was considerably less anonymous and individualistic than ours today, secret sin was perceived as damaging and harmful to the community as a whole. However, Ambrose preserves a great deal of discretion and pastoral sensitivity, and he never mentions that the penitent had to confess his sins in public nor that the Church community needed to be aware of them. But every sin separates from the communion of the Church, and the Church is always involved in some way in the process of reconciliation and forgiveness. Ambrose is certain that healing, repentance, and forgiveness were founded in the Church and that they require human collaboration.⁷⁵ Not just the bishop (*sacerdos*) in charge, but the entire assembly of the Church is to pray for the penitent and for the pardon of his sins.⁷⁶ The penitent 'is purged as by acts of the whole people, and is washed in the tears of the multitude, and redeemed from sin by the weeping of the multitude'.⁷⁷ As in Ambrose's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Church is the inn in which the wounded is to be healed, it is absolutely necessary for the penitent to be embraced in the Church and to have hope of God's forgiveness mediated by the Church.

⁷⁵ See *Paen.* I 7, 30–31; 15, 80; II 7, 56 (CSEL 73, 134; 156n; 186).

⁷⁶ See e.g. *Paen.* II 10, 92 (CSEL 73, 199) and Fitzgerald, *Conversion through Penance*, 213.

⁷⁷ *Paen.* I 15, 80 (CSEL 73, 156f).

Let the Church, our Mother, weep for you, and wash away your guilt with her tears; let Christ see you mourning and say, *Blessed are you that are sad, for you shall rejoice*. It pleases Him that many should entreat for one. In the Gospel, too, moved by the widow's tears, because many were weeping for her, He raised her son. He heard Peter more quickly when he raised Dorcas, because the poor were mourning over the death of the woman. He also immediately forgave Peter, for he wept most bitterly. And if you weep bitterly Christ will look upon you and your guilt shall leave you.⁷⁸

As shown above, Ambrose uses biblical imagery to present a Church that is, in modern language, open and inclusive, conscious of its weakness and sinfulness. The Church is that inn of the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the wounded are welcomed and where they can be cured. It is the Church that, like the anonymous woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, demonstrated her love for Christ and offended the other respectable guests, the Church founded on the tears of Peter, who himself denied Christ, the Church which, like Martha and Mary, mourns over her dead brother. But these tears of the Church are also preceded by the tears of Christ, who is not indifferent to the misery and despair of all those who do not see their sins or do not want to see them: 'The Lord Himself wept over Jerusalem, that, inasmuch as it would not weep itself, it might obtain forgiveness through the tears of the Lord.'⁷⁹

Conclusion

As we have seen in his writings, Ambrose is not just fighting against the heresy of his times that denied the chance of gaining forgiveness to the sinners, but he digs deeper while reflecting on the Church's character and its role, namely in relation to serious offenders. Although the practice of penance in the early Church was significantly more austere and would often last for years, Ambrose encourages his congregation to do penance and continually assures that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven. As bishop, he does not place himself higher than those entrusted to him, only dispensing advice or penalties, but he shows

⁷⁸ *Paen.* II 10, 92 (CSEL 73, 199).

⁷⁹ *Paen.* II 6, 49 (CSEL 73, 184).

empathy for the spiritually diseased members of the body of Christ and puts himself in the same line with sinners who need to ask for forgiveness every day.⁸⁰ For Ambrose, this sympathetic love, *compassio*, ties the entire Church together, both saints and sinners.

To both self-conscious and scrupulous Christians, Ambrose stresses that no one is sinless: not even the great characters of salvation history, to which Scripture bears witness. Ambrose's exegesis is strongly topical as he tries (we might say, by an imaginative method) to involve the audience and the readers in the biblical story and thus to bring them inside the encounter with Christ present in both the Old and the New Testaments, who is the only true Teacher and interpreter of divine mercy, and who desires to pardon all people.⁸¹ In the process of repentance and forgiveness, besides the intellect, also emotions are present; for Ambrose, particularly, tears are almost a sacramental substance effecting the forgiveness of sins. Like the recovery from a severe disease, the entire process can be a long and laborious one but, in the end, has a therapeutic effect, not just for the penitent, but for the entire mother Church, which is there with her support, her prayers, and her tears. For Ambrose, really, the Church is a home, or inn, a place of recovery for all who are suffering from sin and who long to be cured, a place of hopeful confidence where no one can be refused, a place in front of Lazarus' tomb where not just the crowd weeps, but Christ himself, who is merciful and calls each and every sinner from death to life.

In some aspects, Ambrose's teaching on the presence of the weak in the Church can remind the reader of our era of Pope Francis' words of the Church as a field hospital, prepared to welcome and take care of anybody who comes in whatever life condition, be it living (mostly) according to the standards set by the Church, or leading a life that could be found imperfect by regular church-goers or by the clergy. Ambrose shows that anyone takes a journey of purification in his life and that everybody is, in a way, in need of the Good Samaritan on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. In the present situation, when many believers find it difficult to embrace the traditional way of obtaining remission of sins in the Church (as one speaks about the crisis of the sacrament of

⁸⁰ See e.g. *Paen.* II 8, 67, 71–74 (CSEL 73, 190f; 192–194).

⁸¹ See *Paen.* II 6, 40 (CSEL 73, 180).

reconciliation),⁸² Ambrose's attention to the inner attitude of the receiver of forgiveness, expressed by the tears, can find a new resonance. When Ambrose shows the need to ask for forgiveness every day, even for venial sins, this can also find inspiration in the current situation of the Church, where awareness of our need of the God's mercy shown to any believer seems crucial for a renewal of Christian conscience and consciousness of God's economy of salvation.

What is more, Ambrose does not consider penance to be an individualistic exercise of one's spirituality: on the contrary, he focuses on the Church as a communion that is aware of anyone who is part of the same body. Such an approach to the reconciliation requires the mutual effort of anyone in the Church to show true mercy to those who are sinners as we ourselves are. That is tangible especially in the fact that Ambrose, as a bishop, does not hesitate to call himself one of the sinners: a similar attitude of the bishops and other Church ministers in our times might probably bring much more compassion and empathy for those who live in the Church and, still, do not show the kind of holiness a Novatian would welcome. The assertion of a 'more perfect' life of those who entered some 'spiritual' state of life, in comparison with the 'less perfect' laity, tends to bring to the Church an elitist view again. The awareness of the Church ministers, monks, and nuns, that they are also sinners has the potential to bring to the Church a much-needed healthier, more compassionate, and 'anti-Novatian' ecclesiological model.

The poetic and symbolic way Ambrose uses seems fitting enough to inspire even today's believers and to rediscover the richness and variety of the ways toward the remission of one's sins. Meanwhile, the Church, which is welcoming towards those who, according to their abilities, search for a renewal of their relationship with God, can find an apt

⁸² This 'crisis' of understanding and practice of penance is more elaborated in the document of International Theological Commission *Versöhnung und Buße (Penance and Reconciliation)* from 1982. The reflection is in one hand pointed towards the practice of sacrament of reconciliation which has 'in many cases, hardly anything to do with the life of man and the dramatic situation of the present day' and in the other hand towards its roots, i.e. especially in Western civilization, the loss of sense of sin as man's personal responsibility but merely as a problem caused by culture, society, history, etc. See Ctirad Václav Pospíšil and Eduard Krumpolc, eds., *Dokumenty Mezinárodní teologické komise 1969–2017 a některé další texty Papežské biblické komise a Kongregace pro nauku víry* (Olomouc: UPOL, 2017), 216.

model for this aperture towards anybody that would allow her to start becoming a true home of anybody who searches for God.

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