

J.H.W.G. LIEBESCHUETZ, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom: Clerics between Desert and Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 316 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-959664-5, £ 66.00.

In his new book, J.H.W.G. LIEBESCHUETZ [= L.], an outstanding historian of late antiquity, juxtaposes the figures of two individuals, Ambrose and John Chrysostom, each of whom played a key role in the history of the two parts of ancient Christianity, namely the Latin West and the Greek East respectively. What the two characters have in common is that they lived in the same epoch, attained a high position in the Church hierarchy, and had close relations with the courts of Christian emperors seated in the cities where they held their episcopal sees. What is more, having received a very good secular education, they were both very active writers and preachers. Among the moral views and opinions they voiced, numerous can be seen as convergent, especially those propagating the attitudes and actions which enjoyed considerable popularity in the late fourth century and were concerned with the then dynamically developing ascetic movement. However, notwithstanding all the external similarities so obvious to every person familiar with the history of the ancient Church, there are considerable differences between the two figures both in their practical implementation of the ascetic ideal as well as the form and, most importantly, the effectiveness of their political actions.

L. centres his comparative study of Ambrose and John Chrysostom around two categories, namely asceticism on the one hand and their outspokenness, which was uncompromising even if it involved harsh criticism of the ruling emperors, on the other.

In the opening part of the book, the author presents in a synthetic way, first, the classical tradition of ascetic practices and attitudes up until the emergence of the institutionalized and mass Christian monastic movement, and second the still republican provenance of outspokenness as a value whose importance gradually subsided along with the growing consolidation of the imperial system and which eventually almost completely disappeared in late antiquity. L. uses this background in the following two parts of his book to depict its eponymous protagonists. As the part devoted to Chrysostom is three times as long as the part covering Ambrose, it can be assumed that the sources we have provide significantly more information about the ascetic and political aspects of the activity and literary creativity of the bishop of Constantinople than about the bishop of Milan. It is undoubtedly so as far as asceticism and monasticism, especially in practical terms, are concerned. As we learn from a variety of ancient sources, John Chrysostom, before starting his career as a cleric and bishop, led an ascetic life as a monk, whereas Ambrose, before becoming the bishop of Milan, had prominent functions in the imperial administration and little is known about how he implemented the ascetic ideal.

This is not the first time L. has dealt with the political activity of the two great Christian Fathers in a systematic way, although undoubtedly he has so far devoted more time in his publications to John Chrysostom, who is the central figure of a number of longer and shorter pieces written by him, including primarily the monograph entitled *Bishops and Barbarians: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom* (Oxford 1990). As far as Ambrose is concerned, the author's thorough study of the bishop resulted in an excellent English translation of and commentary on his political letters and speeches published by Liverpool University Press in 2010 in the Translated Texts for Historians series (*Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches*, Liverpool 2010).

The second part of the book ("Ambrose", pp. 57–96), devoted to the bishop of Milan, starts with a chapter in which the author describes him as a great enthusiast and promoter of the ascetic and monastic movement, which was only just awakening in the Latin West. The whole body of his writings devoted to the virtues of virginity and widowhood, his strong words on the superiority of common property over private property as well as the founding of a monastery in Milan leave no

doubt in this respect. The portrait outlined by L. also depicts Ambrose as a bishop who not only propagated in theory but also followed in practice the ascetic principles of life. However, I believe that the sources we have encourage greater caution in expressing very definite judgements on this matter. The author of the book, citing *Vita Ambrosii* by Paulinus of Milan, the notary of Ambrose, writes that on taking up the post, the bishop of Milan donated all his property to the Church. What is more, as posthumously praised by the bishop in a commendation composed in his honour, his brother Satirus allegedly had similar intentions with regard to his share of the family estate (p. 65). Although there are not sufficient reasons to deny the truthfulness of Paulinus' words, in my opinion the author of the book should nevertheless remind the reader of their hagiographic context, which should make us perceive them as one of the elements creating the image of an ideal bishop. We must bear in mind that Paulinus wrote *Vita Ambrosii* in North Africa where he managed the property of the Church of Milan and allegedly was explicitly encouraged to write the piece by Augustine, a bishop for whom the disposing of private property was generally a preliminary requirement in order to start a clerical career in the Church of Hippo, which he managed.

Nor am I convinced that the sources really provide, as the author writes, sufficient basis to claim that Ambrose required the clergy of Milan to live a communal life and follow rules of celibacy (p. 65). Here L. refers to a letter written by Ambrose to the electors of a new bishop of Vercelli (*Ep. extr. coll.* 14). In this long letter, which is actually a treatise defending monastic values against the followers of Jovinian, questioning their special status, the bishop of Milan does praise the attitude of the bishop who not only led a monastic life, but also required the subordinate clerics to follow in his footsteps and live a communal life of celibacy. However, Ambrose clearly relates the ideal to a local tradition started in Vercelli a few decades earlier by Eusebius, a bishop who is commonly believed to have been the first in the West to require his clerics to live in a commune. It seems to me that if a monastic community of clerics established by Ambrose really existed in Milan, it would, in the first place, have been mentioned by his hagiographer, who, as I have already pointed out, was inspired to write his text by Augustine, a bishop and monk, but also listed *Vita Ambrosii* as part of the tradition of monastic hagiography ranging from *Vita Antonii*, through *Vita Martini*, to *Vita s. Pauli eremitaе*; *Vita s. Hilarionis*; *Vita Malachi monachi captivi* by Jerome (*Vita Ambrosii*, praef.). It is also puzzling that no mention is made anywhere of any such a community by Augustine, who actually required his monks to live in a community in the bishop's house. After all, the bishop of Hippo on more than one occasion directly expressed his appreciation and admiration for Ambrose, yet the only "monastic" achievement Augustine referred to in his *Confessiones* was the foundation and supervision of the monastery near the walls of Milan.

L. cautiously formulates an interesting thesis that Ambrose's fervent promotion of ascetic practices at the outset of his career as a bishop, most notably of the so-called domestic monasticism and the closely related idea of consecrated virginity as well as his depreciation of private property, whose only *raison d'être* was to provide support for the poor, could have been a part of his peculiar strategy for building a very strong position in Milan. From the theological point of view, the subject caused no controversy between the supporters of the Nicene and anti-Nicene parties, who were fighting against each other at that time. What is more, taking it up could have been a response to palpable public feelings. The bishop could have had a premonition that monasticism would become a fashion in Milan similar to the trend well-established in the East and only recently developing in the circles of Roman aristocratic women (p. 71). Encouraging people to be charitable could certainly have boosted his popularity among the populace of the city (p. 76). However, the last argument is weakened a little by the sermon entitled *De virginitate*, given only a year after the publishing of the treatise *De virginibus*, in which Ambrose replies in a consistent manner to those who blame him for propagating virginity. This suggests the climate in Milan around the emerging monasticism was not so unequivocally positive, a fact which is indeed mentioned by the author of the book himself (pp. 70 f.).

In the chapter closing the second part of the book (pp. 85–91), L. analyses some well-known examples of Ambrose's effective political action, namely the conflict with Valentinian II, or more

precisely with his mother Justina concerned with handing over a basilica in Milan to Arians, the famous public penance imposed on Theodosius for the massacre of Thessalonica, and the effective diplomacy of the bishop of Milan against the restoration of the Altar of Victory in the Roman Senate House and against the punishment of the monks who destroyed a synagogue in Callinicum. Ambrose's attitude and reactions in all these cases, even if the objectivity of the information is somewhat questionable, because, as noted by L., they originate primarily from the writings of Ambrose (p. 94), prove that the bishop of Milan was both a very talented diplomat and an individual of bold courage. The liberties he took by communicating with Theodosius in such an outspoken manner must be considered exceptional, whereas his successful completion of all the actions in the face of the opposition of the imperial court is probably unparalleled, as L. rightly concludes, in the entire history of the Roman Empire (p. 94).

The third part of the book ("Chrysostom", pp. 97–250), following the guiding assumption of the author, depicts John Chrysostom as an ascetic, a theoretician of monasticism, and finally a high-ranking participant of political life. While describing and analysing these spheres of activity of the bishop of Constantinople, L. relies on the availability of both rich source materials and abundant reference books. Apart from a whole range of publications concerned with details and individual issues, he could refer to two still relevant books on Chrysostom which approach this outstanding Church Father from a similar perspective. These are works by J. KELLY (*Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom, Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*, London 1995) and M. ILLERT (*Johannes Chrysostomus und das antiochenische Mönchtum: Studien zur Rhetorik und Kirchenpolitik im antiochenischen Schrifttum des Johannes Chrysostomus*, Zürich 2000). L., however, manages to find his own view on the protagonist of his book and critically uses the reference books he is very familiar with. Whenever he is in agreement with the findings of other researchers, he concedes the point, as is the case for example of the chronology of the life of Chrysostom suggested by KELLY, whereas, if his own research indicates to the contrary, he uses convincing arguments to challenge them. Consequently, on a number of occasions he refers the reader to the theses found in ILLERT'S book, and in some other cases he fundamentally disagrees with the arguments of the author questioning even his methodological approach to the interpretation of the works of the bishop of Constantinople (e.g. p. 130, n. 31; p. 134, n. 3).

Having outlined the broadly understood ascetic environment in which John Chrysostom started to act (pp. 97–109), L. gives a critical presentation of the literary sources covering his life prior to ordination (pp. 113–126). With respect to the fullest account we have on this period, provided by the *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* by Palladius, the author would see this work rather as a reliable historical source and not a hagiographic story legendary in character, as is usually the case with the genre. A particularly noteworthy part of L.'s considerations is his interpretation of the testimony of Socrates Scholasticus, who was the only one among the ancient authors to write that John was ordained by Evagrius of Antioch. Even though the author of the book questions the fundamental part of the testimony and on this matter rather lends credence to Palladius, who says that the ordination was conferred by Flavianus, he nevertheless perceives it as reliable evidence of the existence of certain relations between Chrysostom and Evagrius. What is more, he assumes that the bishop Evagrius might be the same unidentified Evagrius who, according to another record made by Socrates, is supposed to have influenced the young Chrysostom and dissuaded him from pursuing a legal career in order to completely devote himself to Christian life instead. By using this hypothesis, L. explains why the bishop of Constantinople thought so highly of the *Vita Antonii*, a work translated into Latin by Evagrius, and why Chrysostom could be sure of support after his deposition from the see of Constantinople. He supposedly owed his favourable reception there as well as his knowledge of the internal situation of the Church of Italy to the acquaintanceship and contacts Evagrius had in the West (pp. 117–123).

In the following chapters, L. deals with Chrysostom's moral writings, reviewing them in chronological order and in close connection with his status in relation to the institutional Church, which changed over the years from an ascetic-monk through a priest to a bishop. The author focuses on

those of his views and opinions which can be found in the entire body of texts discussed here, such as the explicit reference to the Stoic moral programme, but also on those which evolved under the impact of all kinds of experiences connected with his official functions or social roles, ranging from a full and complete affirmation of monasticism in his earliest writings to an attitude of great reserve towards this phenomenon which he assumed in his works dating to the times when he was already active in teaching in the name of the institutional Church. One example of the specific evolution of Chrysostom's moral appraisal of attitudes in life to be named here is his changing view on the institution of marriage and family life, with which he acquainted himself more closely only while carrying out his ministry (p. 177).

The last chapter of the book is devoted to Chrysostom's treatment of the political situation in Constantinople which he faced, most notably in his relations with the imperial court (pp. 224–250). Admittedly, unlike Ambrose, he did not manage to establish close personal relations with the emperor, but he nevertheless actively participated, though much less successfully than the bishop of Milan, in events considerably affecting the political situation in the capital. A case in point is the mission he embarked on during the events connected with the so-called rebellion of Gainas. In this chapter, L. writes extensively about the relations between Chrysostom and the Empress Eudoxia. He clearly reconstructs the gradual deterioration of their relations, starting from complete harmony when Chrysostom only started to serve as a bishop, when there was a strong and unequivocal anti-Arian bond between them, and ending with the role Arcadius' wife could have played in his ultimate downfall and banishment. Here, the author draws attention to the obvious parallel between the long-lasting conflict between Ambrose and Justina and the dispute between Chrysostom and Eudoxia. He even advances a bold thesis that the bishop of Constantinople might have been aware of how the bishop of Milan acted under similar circumstances and the conspicuous concurrence of arguments used by both of them is not necessarily a result of the general similarity of the historical contexts they found themselves in (p. 243).

The book ends with a part entitled "Conclusion" (pp. 251–261), in which L. gives a synthetic presentation of the similarities and differences to be noted between the two great Fathers of the Church. He tries in the first place to find an answer to the question why, despite all the similarities in their views and positions in relation to the official state authorities, their careers in politics and the Church ended so differently. The author believes, referring in this respect to the conclusions drawn from the excellent monograph written by N. McLYNN (*Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1994), that a key role was played by Ambrose's political sense, and consequently considerably greater skills than in the case of Chrysostom, of finding his way in the world of real politics. However, the main difference in the somewhat controversial activity aimed at propagating the ascetic lifestyle consisted in the fact that the bishop of Milan addressed his teachings on this matter primarily to consecrated virgins and widows, whereas the bishop of Constantinople promoted the universal nature of ascetic virtues.

The book brings together the biographies of an outstanding Roman and an outstanding Greek, making up a comparative composition, a specific syncrisis in which the author compares the protagonists. Finally, it has once again been proved that the composition concept known since ancient times, so brilliantly implemented by Plutarch, can be an attractive model to be copied even in modern scholarly writing.

Przemysław Nehring
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń