



## [Ambrose of Milan, Oration on the Death of Theodosius 12](#)

Theodosius's clemency and piety as the force behind his power as ruler

**Name of the author:** Ambrose of Milan

**Date:** 395 CE Feb 25th

**Place:** Milan

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Christian

**Literary genre:** Funeral Oration

**Title of work:** Oration on the Death of Theodosius

**Reference:** 12

**Commentary:**

Ambrose of Milan's *Oration on the Death of Theodosius* (*De obitu Theodosii*) was delivered on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 395 CE in the cathedral in Milan, forty days after the emperor Theodosius I had died, at the emperor's memorial service. The relationship between the bishop and the emperor has received much scholarly attention, debated largely for its political significance (for a summary and discussion, see Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, chapter 7). Ambrose had encouraged Theodosius to defend Nicene "orthodoxy" over Arian Christianity, which viewed Christ as not consubstantial with God the Father (on the Arian controversy that gripped the fourth century, and with which Ambrose was extremely invested in quashing, see the commentary on [Letter XXI](#)). The emperor called the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, which confirmed the Nicene Creed. Subsequently, edicts of 391 and 392 CE banned outward expressions of pagan worship (*Theodosian Code* 16.10.10; 16.10.12). For Ambrose, Theodosius was a useful political ally for ensuring that Nicene "orthodoxy" was not overcome by Arianism, although the relationship had ups and downs; Ambrose famously refused to give the emperor holy communion in 390 CE following the massacre of thousands of civilians in the city of Thessalonica after a Roman governor was killed there in riots (see *Letter LI*, and the account of Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* V.17-18; this violent act runs contrary to the idealised presentation of a merciful, non-vengeful Theodosius that as we shall see, appears in the oration).

Ambrose wrote to the emperor on several occasions, compelling him to act with clemency towards his enemies, and reminding him that his victory and power was entirely God-given (see [Letters XLI](#) and XLII). In his funeral oration, Ambrose essentially offers a panegyric to the emperor, intertwined with spiritual messages for those who listened to it in the basilica. Among those present were the new emperor in the West, Honorius (reigned 393-423 CE), Theodosius's son who was only ten years of age at the time, his regent and guardian Stilicho, members of the Roman army, court officials, and residents of Milan. The oration betrays the concern that Ambrose has for the Christian empire now that its faithful guardian was dead. The empire was now in the hands of two very young rulers, with a boy of ten in the West and Arcadius (reigned 383-408 CE), Theodosius's eldest son, yet only eighteen himself, in the East. Ambrose's fear for the empire's stability is perhaps indicated by the fact that he frequently addresses the army in the oration, reminding them of Theodosius's military victories and imploring them to show the same faithfulness they showed to him to his sons. Theodosius's virtues—notably piety, clemency, humility—are expounded upon at length, and he is presented as the archetypal Christian ruler and custodian of the Church, the message being that his successors ought to aspire to the same (on Theodosius's virtues in the oration and the way Ambrose presents them as central to his rulership, see Giacomo Raspanti, "*Clementissimus Imperator*").

In the present chapter, Theodosius's good character as a ruler is not only made abundantly clear with a series of virtuous titles highlighting his piety, mercy, and faith (the adjectives used are *pious*, *merciful*, and *faithful*), it is described as being the fulfilment of Scripture. Theodosius's faith (*fides*) is presented as a quality which Scripture has deemed even more rare than mercy (Proverbs 20:6), and Ambrose expounds that for an emperor, for whom tyranny and vengeance are often natural temptations, it is remarkable that Theodosius excelled in positive characteristics, eschewing the negative. As Raspanti points out, the present chapter is the beginning of Ambrose's detailed description of the emperor's *miserecordia* (mercy), which is related to, but not identical to *clementia* (clemency), the latter of which was a traditional Roman virtue. The former is often connected more with the wretchedness of the human condition, and the pity arising from it. Ambrose argues that Theodosius's embodiment of these virtues make up one of the most significant aspects of his approach to politics (Raspanti, "*Clementissimus*").



*Imperator*,” p. 47). As Raspanti argues, Ambrose understands Theodosius’s Christianity throughout the oration as affording him the ability to rise above the temptations towards arrogance and tyranny which naturally accompany power. This is hinted at in *Letter LXII*, where the emperor is presented as humble despite his great power, and as having great pity for his people. It is in this letter that Ambrose compels Theodosius to extend his clemency even to the defeated followers of the usurper Eugenius. Clearly “for Ambrose and his audience it seemed normal for the imperial authority to resort to revenge and the use of terror” (“*Clementissimus Imperator*,” p. 46-47, for the quotation, p. 47; Raspanti points also to chapters 13-14, and 16 of the oration on this theme). The oration goes on in chapter 39-40 to condemn Eugenius, along with Maximus, for failing to uphold “the cardinal virtues of Roman culture and society, *fides*, *pietas*, and *clementia*,” and sees Theodosius as instead inheriting the legacy of Christian faith from the archetypal good ruler, Constantine (“*Clementissimus Imperator*,” p. 48). The theme of clemency is one feature which Raspanti argues points towards Ambrose having taken direct inspiration from Seneca’s *On Clemency*. Raspanti quotes *On Clemency* I.3.3: “Clemency is proper to no one more than to the king and the prince,” from which Seneca goes on to relate this characteristic directly with godliness (“*Clementissimus Imperator*,” p. 51). Perhaps Ambrose wanted to evoke Seneca’s text as a source of authority from Rome’s past, while updating its moral message to fit with a Christian ruler of a Christianised empire.

Later on in the oration, at chapters 50-51, Ambrose contrasts the vices of the “bad emperors” with those of the superior Christian emperors. Caligula and Nero, for instance, are drawn upon as rulers who have gone down in Roman memory as typically tyrannous. Theodosius, however, avoids such injustice in his rulership. The word “unjust” (*iniquus*) which appears in the quotation from Proverbs 19:12 is not found in the Septuagint or Vulgate (the late-fourth century Latin translation of the Bible); this is Ambrose’s addition to drive his point home even more strongly. Essentially, the point that must be emphasised is that Theodosius’s representation as the archetypal Roman ruler is directly linked with his Christianity. He embodies the qualities which Scripture deems as most rare and important, and in this sense can be understood as continuing not only the legacy of Christian emperors begun by Constantine, but also that of God-appointed rulers that existed already in the Hebrew Bible (for a direct comparison of Theodosius with leaders such as Moses, Joshua, and David, see *Letter LXII*). This legacy is one which Ambrose of course hopes will be continued with Theodosius’s sons, for whom the warning against allowing their power to inspire tyranny pervades the entire oration. The chapter concludes with King Solomon’s words interpreted essentially as a foretelling of Theodosius’s rulership, in which his power as Roman leader is expressed not through pride and self-promotion, but rather through pious humility, which recognises his subordinate place to God.

Keywords in the original language:

- [fidelis](#)
- [gratia](#)
- [honorabilis](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [iniquus](#)
- [magnus](#)
- [minitatio](#)
- [miseratio](#)
- [misericors](#)
- [pietas](#)
- [Pius](#)
- [potentia](#)
- [potestas](#)
- [rex](#)
- [suavitas](#)
- [superbia](#)
- [terror](#)
- [ulciscor](#)

Thematic keywords in English:



- [clemency](#)
- [honor](#)
- [justice](#)
- [king](#)
- [King Solomon](#)
- [mercy](#)
- [piety](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Theodosius I](#)
- [vengeance](#)

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