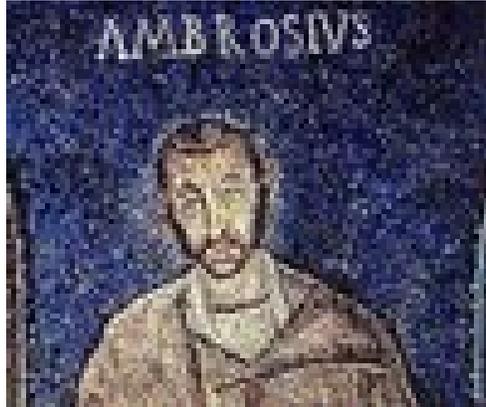


This Day in History: The Death of Ambrose of Milan

April 4, 2018 David Read



On April 4, 397 AD, Ambrose (born c. 340 AD), Bishop of Milan, died. His most quotable quote was, “*when in Rome, do as the Romans do.*”

When I was living in Los Angeles and would find myself driving past the Church of St. Ambrose on North Fairfax Avenue, I would note (to anyone unfortunate enough to be my passenger on such an occasion) that Ambrose’ famous saying originated because of different ways of keeping the Sabbath. In Rome, the Christians fasted on Saturday, but the Christians in Milan did not. So Ambrose reportedly told Augustine, whom he baptized, “**When I am at Rome, I fast on a Saturday; when I am at Milan, I do not. Follow the custom of the church where you are.**” The Reader’s Digest Condensed Version has come down to us as “**When in Rome, do as the Romans do.**”

We Seventh-day Adventists are not impressed by Ambrose’s go-along-to-get-along attitude. The aspect of this story that so tantalizes us is that there were, in the Fourth Century, two different ways of observing Sabbath in two different cities on the Italian peninsula.

I will propose a hypothesis and see how the evidence supports it: The Christians in Rome, who fasted on Sabbath, were well on the way to ceasing to observe it at all, whereas the Christians in Milan were keeping the Sabbath, not fasting on it. In effect, Ambrose was saying that when he was in Rome, he did not worship on Sabbath, but when he was in Milan, he did.

Inherent in this thesis is the idea that fasting on Sabbath and observing the Sabbath as a day of worship are two different things. The Jews never treated the weekly Sabbath as a fast day, and it seems likely that the early Christians would not have fasted on Sabbath either, but would have likely enjoyed a communal meal, even as we Adventists often do on the Sabbath.

First, it must be understood that *the early Christians kept the Sabbath*. Peter Heylyn (1599-1662), an Anglican divine of the 17th Century, tells us that the Sabbath was generally kept by the Eastern Churches, and many in the west, and was held in “fair esteem” in Milan:

“[Sabbath-keeping] was the practice generally of the Eastern Churches; and some churches of the West ... For in the Church of Milan . . . it seems the Saturday was held in a fair esteem . . . Not that the Eastern Churches, or any of the rest which observed that day were inclined to Judaism; but that they came together on the Sabbath day, to worship Jesus Christ the Lord of the Sabbath (Peter Heylyn, D.D., *History of the Sabbath*, London 1636, Part 2, para. 5, pp. 73-74).

Heylyn, who was a scholar of Latin and Greek and read widely in the ancient documents, confirms for us that there were indeed two ways of observing Saturday: (1) observing it and (2) fasting on it:

“Augustine of Hippo, a devout Sunday keeper, attested that the Sabbath was observed in the greater part of the Christian world (Nicene and Post-Nicene

Fathers (NPNF), First Series, Vol. 1, pp. 353-354) and deplored the fact that in two neighboring Churches in Africa, one observed the Seventh-day Sabbath, while another fasted on it (Peter Heylyn, supra, p. 416).

But let us turn to a source who lived at the same time as Ambrose: Socrates of Alexandria (c. 380 - 440). Socrates confirms that most of the Christian churches, presumably including Milan, observed the day of worship on Sabbath. He names only two exceptions:

“For although almost all churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries [the Lord’s Supper] on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this.” (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, Ch. 22, p. 289).

But if we read on, we find that even at Alexandria the difference was not in the day observed but in the manner of observing it. The Alexandrian Christians partook of what was apparently a communal pot-luck lunch, and then came back to church in the evening to celebrate the eucharist:

“The Egyptians in the neighborhood of Alexandria, and the inhabitants of Thebaïs, hold their religious assemblies on the sabbath, but do not participate of the mysteries in the manner usual among Christians in general: for after having eaten and satisfied themselves with food of all kinds, in the evening making their offerings they partake of the mysteries. (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, Ch. 22).

That leaves only the Christians at Rome who had no worship service on the Sabbath. According to Ambrose, the Romans were (sort of) observing Sabbath by fasting on that day but, per Socrates, they did not go to church on Sabbath.

Peter Heylyn goes on to tell us that the northern Italian city of Milan became the center of Sabbath-keeping in the west. So we should not be surprised when inspiration tells that the Waldenses or Vaudois, also of northern Italy, were Sabbath-keepers. It makes complete sense that Sabbath-keeping might have persisted in northern Italy, including in Milan, long after it fell into desuetude in Rome.