



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Milanese Catholics and Bishop Ambrose defend their Basilica, 385-386 CE

Time period notes: Exact start and end dates not clear

(Early 385)

300's

to: (May 386)

300's

Country: Italy

Location City/State/Province: Milan, Roman Empire

Goals:

To prevent any of Milan's three Catholic basilicas from being given to the Arians, a rival Christian sect.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 058. Excommunication › threatened, but not carried out
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Nicene Catholics

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Ambrose is now a Saint, and one of the original four Doctors of the Catholic Church.

Partners:

None known

External allies:

Magnus Maximus, the commander and de facto emperor of the Western territories, threatened to get involved if Valentinian continued to intimidate Ambrose.

Involvement of social elites:

Magnus Maximus, described above.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Popular support from Nicene Catholics

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Magnus Maximus

Segment Length: *Approximately 2.5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Emperor Valentinian II, who ruled from Milan. As Valentinian was only 14, his mother Justina wielded true power. The two of them followed Arianism, which asserted the supremacy of the Father to the Son (Jesus). They were assisted by Auxentius, an Arian bishop who desired a basilica in Milan.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Milan's three basilicas remained firmly under the control of Ambrose and the Nicene Catholics.

Hundreds, possibly thousands of people turned out to oppose the Arian takeover of the basilica

Early Christendom was rife with sectarian conflicts between competing theologians and their interpretations of the life of Jesus. One of these conflicts was between mainstream (Nicene) Catholicism, which emphasized the Holy Trinity, and Arianism, which asserted that Jesus was inferior to God. A crucial event in the competition of doctrines occurred in 385-86 C.E., in Milan, modern-day Italy. Milan at that time was controlled by the Roman Emperor Valentinian II. Although Valentinian held the title of Emperor and ruled from Milan, the Empire was in the process of fragmentation and Valentinian had little control over his generals in the East and West; moreover, he was only fourteen years old. His mother Justina, an Arian, essentially ruled through him, and sought to strengthen Arianism in Milan. To achieve this end, the two of them invited Auxentius, an Arian bishop, to reside in Milan and begin winning converts. Auxentius obliged, but could not baptize his converts without a basilica for the Arian church.

At this time, Milan had three basilicas, known as the New, the Old, and the Portian basilicas. In early 385, Ambrose, Catholic bishop of Milan, was summoned to the imperial court by Valentinian and Justina and asked to cede one of the basilicas to Auxentius and the Arians. Ambrose later recalled feeling intimidated by the royal court, and inclined to obey the demand. However, his courage was restored by the arrival of a mob of parishioners, who had heard of the meeting and sought to preserve all three basilicas for Catholic worship. When the crowd surrounded the compound and angrily voiced their opinion, the royals were forced to ask Ambrose to go outside and calm the people. Ambrose, who was very popular among the citizenry of Milan, did so, and the royals subsequently dropped their demands for a basilica.

On January 23 of the following year, 386, Justina and Valentinian passed a law explicitly granting freedom of worship to Arians and permitting capital punishment for anyone who criticized Arianism. Scholars believe this law was passed at the direct instruction of Auxentius. In early March, the emperor renewed his request that the Portian basilica be given to the Arians. When Ambrose refused to do so, the royals ordered that he leave Milan, but he refused. Then, Auxentius invited Ambrose to debate the theological issues at stake before a supposedly neutral panel. This was a rather transparent trap—Ambrose's side of the debate would have been wholly illegal under the newly passed law. In declining the invitation, Ambrose did not accuse Auxentius of entrapment, but instead noted that lay-people were not qualified to judge bishops.

After Ambrose denied several more requests for the Portian basilica, the royal court decided to escalate its efforts at the beginning of Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, March 30, soldiers began to put up imperial tapestries at the Portian to indicate its seizure, but a crowd assembled to peacefully prevent the takeover (the exact method by which they dissuaded the soldiers from

putting up the tapestries is unclear). The next day, Justina and Valentinian again asked that Ambrose simply cede the Portian, and again he refused. The emperor also imposed fines and even imprisonment upon prominent Milanese businessmen who publicly supported Ambrose. On Tuesday, imperial soldiers attempted again to seize the Portian, and reached a standoff with a huge crowd of Catholics who again spontaneously gathered to protect the basilica. For a time, it appeared the impasse might result in violence, but this seems to have been averted. The soldiers stood down, but returned early Wednesday before daybreak and definitively occupied the Portian.

As news of this development spread, parishioners filled the Old basilica where Ambrose was giving mass. Soon, some of the Catholic soldiers at the Portian began to fear excommunication, and decided not to further the aims of the Arian religion they did not themselves practice. They abandoned the just-captured basilica, and walked to the Old basilica to join the congregation in prayer. With few soldiers remaining, the masses reentered the Portian, tore down the royal banners, and called for Ambrose to come to the scene. Rather than going in person, Ambrose sent several priests over and continued to give mass as he ordinarily did. The next day, Maundy Thursday, Valentinian ordered the non-deserting soldiers to withdraw from the Portian.

Soon after this, on an undetermined date in April or May, Valentinian and Justina made a final attempt to secure the Portian basilica for Auxentius and the Arians. Imperial soldiers once again surrounded the Portian, but this time Ambrose was inside. Ambrose and his congregation remained in the basilica for several days and nights, during which he delivered a polemical sermon against Auxentius. Ambrose directly blamed Auxentius for conspiring with the royal court and declared that he had no right to call himself a bishop. Parishioners sang hymns to keep high spirits throughout their occupation of the basilica. After several days, the royal court backed down for the last time, for reasons unclear. Some scholars propose that Magnus Maximus, a Catholic army commander and de facto ruler of the Western Empire, warned the weaker Valentinian to cease harassing Ambrose. Others say that Ambrose's will and the popular support for maintaining the basilicas in Catholic control were simply too great for Valentinian and Justina to overcome.

Another blow to hope of Arian control in Milan was dealt on June 17, when workers under Ambrose's direction discovered the relics of Gervasius and Protasius, the patron saints of Milan. Ambrose gained hugely in popularity as a result of this discovery, further strengthening his already powerful position. Ambrose was sanctified after his death, and is revered as one of the four original Doctors of the Catholic Church.

Research Notes

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

The chronology of this case is very much a matter of dispute. Scholars have differing opinions on whether the siege of the Portian basilica with Ambrose inside (the non-violent occupation) took place during the disruptions during Holy Week 386, or if it was at a different time entirely. As Lenox-Conyngham seems to have taken the most care in sorting the matter out, I have followed his chronology as well as his account of which actions took place in which basilica.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

William Lawrence, 13/12/2010

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