
AMBROSE'S USE OF ARCANUM

A FRIENDLY SPACE BOTH HUMAN AND DIVINE

David Vopřada*

*Catholic Faculty of Theology, Charles University in Prague, Thákurova 3, 160 00 Prague 6,
Czech Republic*

(Received 12 March 2014, revised 27 May 2014)

Abstract

In the context of Ambrose's understanding of God's revelation and human knowledge of God, the concept of 'secret' and 'mystery' plays a key part. The paper analyses the term *arcanum*, one of the words used for this concept, in the corpus of Ambrose's work. The research argues that, for Ambrose, the expression is a meeting place of the Classic and Christian tradition, of religious knowledge and the knowledge confided by friends, of the divine essence and human interior, of the Word-Bridegroom and Church-Bride. The object of this *arcanum* is Christ of the Nicene faith, God and man and this faith is indispensable for the knowledge of the mystery of God. This understanding of the 'secret' may change our understanding of the *disciplina arcani*, the ancient ecclesiastical custom to keep silence regarding Christian mysteries. Possible inspiration of Ambrose's thought on the subject is suggested both to the world of science and the recent documents of the Catholic Church.

Keywords: Latin Patristics, mystagogy, anthropology, science, faith

1. Introduction

In recent years, the important role of the mystery of Christ and of *disciplina arcani*, the ancient ecclesiastical custom not to reveal some of the key Christian doctrines to those who have not yet been initiated, has been discussed and studied in the works and thought of Saint Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340–397) [1-3]. Several modest contributions to this research may have come to light also thanks to my own research of this topic, especially in relation to his *Commentary on Psalm 118* [4, 5]. This concept of 'secret' and 'hidden mystery', very dear to the Bishop of Milan, is generally acknowledged as a key part of Ambrose's theory of knowledge, but it can also prove to be inspiring even for current fundamental Theology especially regarding the Christian concept of revelation. To describe this 'mystery', Ambrose employs several terms, such as *occultum*, *secretum* or *mysterium*. Of particular interest is the expression *arcanum*, employed by the Bishop to describe divine knowledge revealed to the faithful

*E-mail: voprada@ktf.cuni.cz, phone: +420 220 181 529, fax : +420 220 181 234

which not only imparts particular information but also creates a space of faith and trust between God and man.

This paper studies this concept of *arcanum* in the corpus of Ambrose's works, where this term appears 48 times. The study argues that Ambrose transforms a notion already present in the Classical tradition into his way of thinking permeated with a complex theological concept of Christian revelation. In order to present the range of meanings of *arcanum* in Ambrose's work, I firstly offer an examination of the significance of the word already present in Classical Latin literature. After showing different contexts in which the *arcanum* was originally used, I secondly present the variety of meanings the term *arcanum* acquires in Ambrose's corpus. Finally, provided with this linguistic background, I suggest some consequences of Ambrose's use of the term and some theological implications of this concept of God's revelation from the point of view of the Christian faith.

2. Original meaning of *arcanum*

Ambrose was brought up in the classical Roman culture; he knew not only his mother tongue very well, but, during the years of his studies at Rome, he also familiarized himself with great Roman and Greek writers and poets as well. Thus, Ambrose managed to accept and assimilate this culture in his teaching of the Christian faith [6, 7]. This is also true about his use of the Latin word *arcanum*, which the Bishop transformed into one of his categories of thinking. Using this expression, Ambrose tried to describe God's nature and the content of the Christian revelation. Eventually, the acquired secret is made an object of his preaching, and he tries to keep it even while teaching it.

First of all, let us consider the meaning of the *arcanum* in the Roman culture. It originally describes an object or a secret place not known by many. It can also stand for all future events, prophecies or the laws of nature that escape human knowledge and comprehension. The *arcanum* can even describe the 'night' that covers the events and things in the darkness. Nonetheless, the prevalent meaning of the *arcanum* refers to secret and private information, thoughts and plans which are kept secret in one's heart or which are shared by a handful of people; for example, it can concern war plans or the policies of the Empire [8-12].

This secret regards something that cannot be observed publicly. Therefore, it is the private life of the house (*domus*) or of the wedded couple that is *arcana* [10, p. 28; 12, p. 443]. In this context, the term can even describe objects or knowledge of a religious cult, especially a private one (*sacra privata*), for instance, the sacred flame of Vesta [13, 14]. And finally, as far back as the oldest times, the *arcanum* stands for the mystery cults that can be revealed only to those who have been initiated in them [9, p. 118; 11, p. 623; 15-19].

Alongside this religious aspect of the *arcanum*, this Roman concept is very strongly linked with 'trust' (*fides*): only someone who keeps silence regarding a secret that has been entrusted to him can gain the trust of his friends

or of the divinity. Such a person can thus be called *arcanus* [17, p. 23; 20; 21]. As we shall see, especially this aspect of trust concomitant with the *arcanum*, will be significantly emphasized in Ambrose's work.

3. Divine mystery

As we have seen, the *arcanum* originally referred to a hidden object or place, a secret, a knowledge regarding a religious cult and trust among friends. First of all, Ambrose builds upon the classical understanding of the expression and uses it to describe God, his existence and his most intimate nature, which surpasses human comprehension, i.e. the ineffable mystery of God's existence and the communion of one nature of the divine persons [Ambrose, *De fide* IV 5, 62; *De Spiritu Sancto* II 11, 129; III 21, 163 (SAEMO [= Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera] 15, 284; 16, 242. 350)]. In this sense, the *arcanum* is the bosom of the Father, where the Son is begotten according to both the divinity and the flesh: "The spiritual bosom (*sinus*) of the Father is understood as some intimate secret of the Father's love and nature, in which there is always the Son. In the same way, the Father's womb (*uulua*) is that of an interior secret (*arcanum*), from which the Son proceeds as from the motherly womb. ... But as we understand that generation from the Father, if we want to achieve the perfect faith, we have to understand also the generation from Mary, when the motherly womb (*uulua*) has been blessed, that is the virgin womb of Mary that gave to us Lord Jesus." [Ambrose, *De patriarchis* 11, 51; see *De fide* I 10, 64f.; IV 8, 87; IV 9, 109. 112; *De Spiritu Sancto* I 11, 119 (SAEMO 4, 58–60; 15, 86–88. 294. 306–308; 16, 136–138)]

It can be noticed that a very similar area of meanings to the *arcanum* is covered by the word *sinus*. In the original meaning, *sinus* was the fold of a garment over the breast or the breast itself as a part where somebody or something was held for affection or protection [22]. For instance, it was a place where gods were carried [17, p. 63]. However, in another sense, it is also the place where secrecy or secret joy is preserved [23], and it stands, therefore, for the innermost part of the being, i.e. the heart. Analogously to the concept of *arcanum*, Ambrose inherits this meaning from the classical culture and reinterprets it from the point of view of his Christian faith, assigning to it the central meaning of the double generation of the Son, which forms the heart of the Christian mystery. The *sinus* is thus the place of perpetual and temporal generation of the Son which forms a part of the Father's *arcanum*. Hence, not only is the Son's eternal generation from the Father and temporal one from Mary arcane [Ambrose, *De fide* IV 8, 88; 9, 111; V 2, 36 (SAEMO 15, 294. 308. 350)], but it is also true about the coming of Christ together with all the events made available by the Incarnation: all the deeds of the life of Jesus, and especially his Passion [Ambrose, *De fide* V 16, 191; 16, 230 (SAEMO 15, 426. 448)].

God's wisdom is being revealed by the Son, who is the Wisdom of God and stays forever in the bosom of the Father, the Source of the Wisdom [Ambrose, *De fuga saeculi* 2, 10 (SAEMO 4, 80)]. Nevertheless, the wisdom cannot be conceived only as the content of these ideas but also as God's will which is coming to fulfilment (*piae uoluntatis arcana*). What happens in history is, in this way, closely connected to the essence of living God [Ambrose, *De Spiritu sancto* II 12, 132 (SAEMO 16, 246)]: "But what is it, what God's wisdom does not know, the one which is forever in the bosom of the Father (*in arcano patris*)? But everything can be narrated by the Son of God because he himself is the Wisdom of the Father" [Ambrose, *Explanatio psalmorum* xii 39, 16 (SAEMO 8, 20f)]. This knowledge of the divine mystery is given to the Son, whose nature is both divine and human. In Christ, then, this *arcantum* can be made available for man. Ambrose comments several times on 2 Corinthians 12.1ff, where Paul is raptured to Heaven, and the knowledge of certain secrets is revealed to him [Ambrose, *Explanatio psalmorum* xii 36, 41 (SAEMO 7, 200)]. The Bishop uses this example to demonstrate that all Christians can participate on this knowledge of the divine mystery: "Whoever will find himself carried into paradise by his virtue, he will hear those arcane and secret mysteries of God (*mysteria dei arcana illa atque secreta*), he will hear the Lord saying, as to the brigand who converted from crime to confession and from robbery to faith: *Today you will be with me in Paradise*" [Ambrose, *De paradiso* 11, 53 (SAEMO 2/1, 124f)].

The mystery of God's inner life, the generation of his Son and his deeds on earth are accordingly accessible only to Christ, God's Wisdom, who confides this revelation to man. Consequently, only those who are in Christ (*homo in Christo*) can access these hidden realities. For those, however, who stay outside (*homo exterior*), the veil of God's *arcantum* cannot be removed. That is why Paul, 'man in Christ', can understand the mysteries of the third heaven, but he cannot communicate them to those who are on earth, because there he cannot find the conditions for this communication. Instead, he shares them "now in heaven" with others who are "in Christ" since "the secrets of the wisdom must be revealed among the perfect" [Ambrose, *Explanatio psalmorum* xii 36, 41 (SAEMO 7, 200)].

4. The human interiority

God is someone who knows all secrets; he knows the secrets of man, who hides himself from the sight of God after the fall [*De paradiso* 14, 70 (SAEMO 2/1, 152); Claudianus Mamertus, *De statu animae* I 8 [CSEL 11, 132f]]. Anybody to whom the divine wisdom is given, as it was to Salomon, can come to know the secret of man and to recognise his real nature. In Ambrose's *De virginitate* 1, 1 (SAEMO 14/2, 12), King Salomon cannot judge the intimate secret (*arcantum*) of the two women about the fact which of them is the mother of the child because the minds of both women remain hidden. When Salomon

discovers the intentions of the women, he is able to recognise their nature as well.

In a letter written to bishop Vigilius (identified with the Bishop of Trent [24, 25]), Ambrose deals with a problem of mixed matrimonies between Christians and pagans, which seems to be rather common in his days. There, he uses a striking example of the secret of Samson's strength, which is sought by his women in order to let him be overcome by his enemies [Ambrose, *Epistulae* 62, 8–33 (SAEMO 20, 150–66)]. Since sharing such a secret with one's spouse is a sign of affection and trust, one of his women laments that she has not been "confided the riddle (*arcanum*) of her man, saying: *You must hate me; you do not love me, because you have not told me the answer*" [Ambrose, *Epistulae* 62, 16 (SAEMO 20, 156f)]. After long persuasion, Samson entrusts his enigma to Dalila, who immediately reveals her husband's secret to the Philistines, and, in this way, she betrays also the affection and trust of her husband, who shared his *arcanum* with her [Ambrose, *Epistulae* 62, 17. 29 (SAEMO 20, 156. 164f)]. For Ambrose, the opening of one's own heart and the confiding to someone else one's *arcana* is one of the most precious goods of friendship that can be shared only among truly loyal friends who can absolutely rely upon each other [Ambrose, *De officiis* III 22, 132 (SAEMO 13, 354)].

This trustworthy faith of the spouses (*fides*) represents a major step towards another meaning of the *arcanum*, which is the Christian faith (*fides*) entrusted to the believer by God through the Church and kept dear in one's heart [F. Gori in SAEMO 14/1, 139, n. 130]. Unlike Samson, who suffered blindness and death because of his inability to keep his secrets, Christian spouses should not share their faith without caution, but they should keep it in their heart hidden from their pagan spouses. If they confided their faith easily, they would betray not only their own interiority but also their Christian faith that was given to them [Ambrose, *Epistulae* 62, 7. 34 (SAEMO 20, 148. 166)].

5. Faith hidden in the human heart

We have seen that, in Ambrose's work, the *arcanum* stands for God's mystery hidden in the bosom of the Father and made available to man who is in Christ; the key to this knowledge of the *arcanum* is Christ himself, God and man. In this way, it is not only a secret concerning God, but it concerns man as well. These divine and human spheres are not, however, independent, but they remain joined together. They contain the faith entrusted to the believer by God and by the Church in the sacraments of initiation. The content of the *arcana* is Christ and everything revealed to mankind with his coming, that is, the sacraments of the Church.

These realities do not represent an inaccessible secret, and they are arcane only from the point of the view of the Old Testament. Someone whose sight is yet under the shadow cannot see them: "But the mysteries are not uncertain, because they are sure. Nor are they uncertain, the secrets and arcana of the

wisdom, but are not yet known. This means that they have not been made known to anybody yet.” [Apologia David 12, 58 (SAEMO 5, 116f)]

The truth (*ueritas*) of the New Testament, the object of the *arcanum*, is contrasted with the shadow and form (*umbra, figura, typus*) of the Old Testament because it refers to unrevealed things, and this is the reason why they remain unknown. It is the knowledge of Christ, who opens the access to this truth; the quill of Christ writes then the commandments of the divine Scriptures and the mystery of his Father’s will in the interior (*arcanum*) of the mind [Ambrose, *De paenitentia* I 14, 68. 71; *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* V 105 (SAEMO 17, 212–214; 11, 440)]: “Christ, you show yourself to me not through enigmas as in a mirror, but face to face. I possess you entirely in your sacraments. These are the true sacraments of your wisdom. With them, the secret sentiments of the mind are being purified.” [Ambrose, *Apologia David*]

Therefore, the sacraments, as an entrance to the mystery of God prepared by Christ himself, are themselves arcane. In other words, the faith and the sacraments of the New Testament are a part of the *arcanum* [Ambrose, *Apologia David*]. Nevertheless, even in the Old Testament, the faith of the New Testament can be found. In fact, this faith can be seen even before the Incarnation: Abraham, believing in Christ and keeping his faith in the Trinity, can fulfil his sacrifice to God together with his interior and the faith contained in his heart [Ambrose, *De Cain et Abel* I 8, 30; *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* VIII 48 (SAEMO 2/1, 224f; 12, 320)]. The part of the *arcanum* is thus also the faith in its spiritual and Christological understanding, which is able to see Christ in the ‘day that shines’ whereas the others (‘the Synagogue’) find themselves yet ‘in the night’ and do not know the reality of the New Testament, which has not yet been revealed to them.

Even after the coming of Christ, those who have not yet obtained the faith (*fides*) and who are not faithful (*fidelis*) cannot understand the real meaning of the Scripture because the mystery of the Incarnation stays hidden from them. In this sense, even the spiritual sense of the Scriptures is something that makes a part of the divine *arcanum*: “Even a pagan who takes the Scriptures in his hands, reads: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. He reads too: *If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off*. He does not understand the meaning of these words, he is not aware of the secrets (*arcana*) of the divine speech and he turns worse than if he had not read it.” [Ambrose, *De paradise* 12, 58 (SAEMO 2/1, 138f)]

As we see, besides God and the interior of man, the *arcanum* stands for the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures and the mystical comprehension of the meaning of the faith [Ambrose, *De fuga saeculi* 2, 5; *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* VII 113 (SAEMO 4, 76; 12, 174)]. It is kept in a Christian’s heart, which becomes a “place” where crucial moments of Christian life happen. The Christian secret is, therefore, synonymous to all the work of justification initiated by the baptism. It is in this intimate place where Christian prayer takes place; Christians pray to their Father in secret (*arcanum secretumque*) [Ambrose, *De sacramentis* VI 3, 12; *De Cain et Abel* I 9, 35 (SAEMO 17, 122; 2/1, 232)]. This interior must be protected by the faithful to keep not only the

integrity of their life, but the secret of Christ as well [Ambrose, *De virginitate* 4, 19 (SAEMO 14/2, 26)]. This actually seems to correspond to the three areas protected by the *disciplina arcani* in the Milanese corpus of mystagogical catecheses: the Symbol of faith, the sacraments, and the prayer [5, p. 99-106].

As a synthesis of a spiritual vision able to attain to the secrets of divine wisdom and contained in the faith and in the Scriptures, Ambrose refers to the example of John resting at Jesus' heart, where he gains profound knowledge of the Lord that remains hidden from others [Ambrose, *De paradiso* 12, 58; *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento* 4, 29 (SAEMO 2/1, 138f; 6, 392)]. There, from Christ's heart, "the Beloved of the Lord drew the secrets of wisdom and arcana of his will, skipping over what the others have said, has committed himself to search and to prove with his judgment the perpetual virginity of the mother, as a son concerned about his mother's chastity takes care, so that no one, accusing her of violating her integrity, would put such a shame on her" [Ambrose, *De institutione virginis* 7, 46 (SAEMO 14/2, 146)].

Leaning on Christ's chest, John arrives at the wisdom of Christ and the mystery of the life of the Trinity, where God reveals himself [Ambrose, *De interpellatione Iob et David* I 9, 31; *Expositio psalmi cxviii* II 6; *Epistulae* 2, 4; 67, 7 (SAEMO 4, 166; 9, 90; 19, 38; 20, 192)]. He contemplates the Logos and God's majesty and divine nature. What is more, he becomes a symbol of the faithful, who get to know the more perfect sacraments, i.e. the sacrament of baptism, which illuminates them and gives them access to a deeper understanding of reality [Ambrose, *Explanatio psalmodum xii* 36, 36 (SAEMO 7, 194); *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* prol. 3; ep. 2, 4; 9, 3f (SAEMO 7, 194; 11, 82-84; 19, 38. 104-106)]. However, this experience of John is not reserved to the chosen, but it is at the disposal of all those addressed by the sermon of the Bishop [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* III 6; *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* VII 230 (SAEMO 9, 128; 12, 268)]. In fact, John represents the members of the Church in their perfect state, who have arrived at some level of perfection in their spiritual journey. These *perfectiores* are heading towards the mystical realities and have a certain familiarity with the Lord [Ambrose, *De Isaac vel anima* 8, 72 (SAEMO 3, 114)]. They have taken on a spiritual and nuptial garment, and they live according to the Spirit, moving towards heavenly things, towards the resurrection [Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* VII 231 (SAEMO 12, 270)].

6. Royal secret bestowed on the believer

In his *Commentary on Psalm 118*, Ambrose states that no one can arrive at the real wisdom without keeping the secret the King has entrusted to him [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* II 26-29 (SAEMO 9, 112-116) and my *Disciplina arcani*, 36-46]. In this text, Ambrose exhorts his faithful that they should not only seek the knowledge of the rites of initiation but also pursue the deeper wisdom of the works of the Lord. Taking example from Mary and John, they should store this acquired knowledge in their heart [Ambrose, *Expositio*

psalmi cxviii II 6; XIII 3 (SAEMO 9, 90; 10, 60)]. Without this knowledge, it is impossible either to know God or oneself [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* II 26 (SAEMO 9, 114)]. Nevertheless, because these mysteries are secret (*secreta mysteria*), the faithful cannot reveal them to those who have not received the Christian faith [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* (SAEMO 9, 112–114); *De mysteriis* 1, 2 (SAEMO 17, 132)]. The royal secret should, therefore, be hidden as a treasure in the field and should be guarded [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* II 27f (SAEMO 9, 114–116)]. Only in this way, the Christian believer can arrive at the Kingdom of Heaven: “Indeed, *not everybody who says: ‘O Lord, O Lord!’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven*, but he who does the will of God. Therefore, he who straightened up his way [...], observed the words of God, has searched for Lord his God with all his heart and has not been repelled from his commandments and who has been judged worthy to be imparted with the secrets of wisdom (*arcana sapientiae*), who has hidden them in his heart, so that he would not sin against God, he [...] thanks God with the words: *Blessed are you, O Lord.*” [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* II 29 (SAEMO 9, 116)]

These *arcana* represent the Lord’s will which John attained at his bosom [Ambrose, *De institutione virginis* 7, 46; *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento* 4, 29 (SAEMO 14/2, 146; 16, 392)]. It is thus wisdom that can be learned only through a mystical experience by any faithful person who seeks to follow the law of the Lord in its spiritual understanding, which he comes to learn at the right time from Christ himself, the “real interpreter of the Scriptures” [Ambrose, *De paradiso* 11, 53; *Expositio psalmi cxviii* II 31 (SAEMO 2/1, 124; 9, 118)]. In fact, the knowledge of God’s *arcana* opens the Christian believer, as a part of the Church-Bride, to understanding the spiritual sense of the Scriptures and transforms his interior into the wedding chamber of the King, where an ineffable dialogue between God and man takes place [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* I 16f (SAEMO 9, 78–80)]. Because the object of this royal mystery is Christ himself, who must remain hidden in the heart of the faithful, it is also the Christian himself, united with Christ and together with him hidden in God, who is a part of this divine *arcana*.

7. Secret donated to the Church

It is not only the individual who comes to know Christ as the beginning and the end of all the Law and justification but also the Church. She acquired this key knowledge at the moment of the Incarnation of the Son of God, which reveals the mystery of God in history hidden from the beginning of the ages: “After the Apostles have learned it from Christ, the Church can say: *The King has brought me to his chamber (cubiculum)*, it means, he has made me penetrate his secret, in which there are the treasures of his wisdom and understanding” [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* II 29 (SAEMO 9, 116–118)].

The Bridegroom, the Word, grants the secret to his Bride, the Church. The Bride cannot please the Bridegroom if she does not keep what has been entrusted to her so she must remain faithful to the entrusted secret (*fida seruantem*

silentia) [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* IV 18 (SAEMO 9, 184–186); *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* VII 128 (SAEMO 12, 188)]. This “silent faith of the secrets” is considered an essential quality of the Church-Bride, “closed garden of the saints”, in which a neophyte is brought and where he has to nourish his faith. In this way, we come to understand that the *arcana* stand for the *sacra*, all that grows in the closed garden of the Church and all the gifts (*dos*) that her Bridegroom has presented to her. The *arcana* are the fruits of his work of redemption and the intimate union and nuptial love of the Bride herself [26]. But how can the Church preach about this mysterious knowledge that has been conferred on her as something she should keep silent about? (In Ambrose's time, it was only the Bishop who preached in the Church of Milan.) [27] Ambrose describes that the Bishop, interpreter of the mystical realities, preaches better when he keeps silent because, by revealing the *arcana*, he disgraces the beauty of Christ: “The Church praises the beauty of the Bridegroom, whose praise is greater, when she keeps silent, of whom far greater is the celebration, if the faithful interpreter of the mystical realities (*fidus mysteriorum interpres*) keeps silent. In fact, he who divulges the secrets (*arcana*), disgraces the beauty of Christ.” [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* IV 18 (SAEMO 9, 186)]

Therefore, the *arcana* embrace the beauty of God, his ineffable essence, which is available for the Church-Bride, who has fallen in love with him and has been engaged to him. The term is strongly linked to the mysteries of Christian initiation that cannot be disclosed to everybody. In this way, it refers to the Christian life that opens with the initiation in its entirety. The concept of divine beauty and God's essence is thus shared between the Spouses, and the *arcana* describe not only the divine, which remains veiled and inaccessible to man but also the divine shared in the interior of the faithful who is making progress in his knowledge of God. The *arcana* do not comprise only the sphere of the divine or only that of the human interior but also a both divine and human space that opens between God and the faithful with the baptism and the initiation in general. He who expects Christ, “the Sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4.2), will “receive Christ as his light (*Christum inluminantem*). It will be him, the first light to shine in the secret (*arcano*) of your heart.” [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* XIX 30 (SAEMO 10, 310–312)] The faithful heart itself, the human interior illuminated by Christ, is a place where Christ resides [Ambrose, *Explanatio psalmorum* xii 39, 21 (SAEMO 8, 28–30)]. The secret to keep is not only heavenly and ineffable, but it can be found in the human interiority (*intus*) [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* XII 2–4 (SAEMO 10, 10–12)].

In this way, the secret of God has become the secret of the Church and her members. To reveal the mystery of God would mean to reveal one's own secrets which one holds as such in the intimacy of his heart. In my opinion, this can be the core of Ambrose's theological reasoning for the *disciplina arcani* as practiced especially in his baptismal catecheses.

Let us not forget that the discovery of Christ in the interior of man is always put in the context of a prayer, liturgy and the meditation of the divine word [Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi cxviii* XIX 32; VIII 50f. (SAEMO 10, 310–

312; 9, 362–364)]. Ambrose, therefore, always keeps together the faithful as an individual, the Church and the celebration as the space where the *arcantum* can be known and accessed.

8. Conclusions

In this study, I have argued that Ambrose introduced his concept of *arcantum*, already present in Classical Latin, as a rich and complex theological category of its own. The expression describes not only what involves the intra-Trinitarian existence of God but also the divine action *ad extra*: the Incarnation and everything that God revealed to mankind with the coming of Christ. Analogically, the *arcantum* does not describe the interior of man and what forms a part of it, that is his thoughts and designs, nor even the faith (*fides*) consigned to the Christian so that he would keep it as his secret. However, Ambrose uses the word *arcantum* to describe the more profound and spiritual meaning of the Scripture and even the Christological understanding of the faith. Finally, we have seen that the *arcantum* is used to stand for the work of justification completed by God in the life of the Christian believer and all the gifts the Word-Bridegroom has entrusted to his Church-Bride.

Secondly, we have to bear in mind that the boundaries of the individual meanings do not seem to be easily distinguished. Various meanings of the expression overlap thanks to the context and the logical concatenation of the singular values of the word. Ambrose joins together the religious context of the term and the context of the friendship or of the nuptial relationship. In this way, he actually presents God as a friend of man, who does not reveal to him only a particular secret wisdom but the knowledge of his own nature and of his own beauty in the universal and individual history of salvation. This is kept and valued as a treasure in the believer's heart. The principle of this knowledge is Christ, God and man, who resides in the heart of the Christian believer and bestows on him the eyes of faith able to recognise the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures and of all reality.

Furthermore, this understanding of the *arcantum* is possibly the concept underlying the way in which Ambrose makes use of the *disciplina arcani*. It seems that the realities subjected to the *disciplina arcani* have to be considered in a much more generic sense than it is widely acknowledged; there is much more than the mere knowledge of the rite of the sacraments and the Symbol of Faith. These realities can be found in the faithful's interior. They concern God in their Christological understanding and mirror what this faith performs in the life of the faithful, who has been permitted to see the mystery with 'Apostle John's sight'. They are arcane and cannot be divulged because, by unveiling the secret, the faithful would loose the trust (*fides*) of the one who has entrusted this secret to him.

In a way, Ambrose's understanding of the mystery of God and his revelation to mankind corresponds to some achievements of theology in the 20th century. It is confirmed especially by the Christocentric character of his

theology. Christ, both God and man as recognised by the Nicene Creed, is God's Wisdom and the access to any true knowledge of God. God reveals himself to man through Christ, and only through Christ this revelation is accessible. This concept seems to be vital for today's notion of knowing God, simultaneously transcendent and immanent. It is not only an intellectual knowledge but also a 'spiritual vision', which enables to contemplate the beauty of God and his creation. These 'eyes of faith' involve all of man's natural capabilities endowed by the light of the revelation of God, who does not only teach about his nature and his work, but, in Christ Jesus, he entrusts himself to man, becoming the principle of man's understanding of God, himself and all reality [28]. The self-revelation of God in Christ, God and man, creates in the interior of the Christian believer a space of the *arcanum*. Christ is the point where God and the faithful 'meet' and where man's knowledge of God can be acquired. At the same time, though, it is the heart of the faithful where Christ is invited to reside. The faithful's inner man is a place where God's mystery is stored and where this space of *arcanum* can be found. Additionally, the *arcanum* confided to the faithful in the baptism ensures that the truth about God as confessed and worshipped by the Church cannot be truly known without participating in the mystery of Christ himself. Without a truly committed relationship with Christ and without partaking in the mystery of his life, passion and resurrection, without the integrity of belief and action in the faithful's life, this knowledge of the mystery of God is a mere illusion. This would eventually explain the great emphasis of the Bishop on the nuptial relationship between the Logos and the Church, between Christ, the Bridegroom, and the Christian soul, the Bride.

It is obvious that Ambrose's persistence that it isn't possible to reveal one's knowledge (not only of faith but of any knowledge of reality both divine and natural) cannot be easily received by the auditorium of today's scientists. The scientific community tends to an unlimited access to acquired knowledge, and open access to the results of scientific papers is today perceived as one of the key indicators of scientific progress. Nonetheless, two caveats can be observed in the prism of Ambrose's theory of knowledge of the *arcanum*.

First, the relationship with the truth (for Ambrose and Christianity the Truth personified in Jesus Christ) remains for any individual a personal relationship. The science cannot be reduced to an ephemeral quest for personal career or someone's profit; the faith that the truth can be attained and that it is priceless to know the truth remains crucial for any area of scientific work. The teaching of the Catholic Church reflects this fact quite recently in the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II *Fides et Ratio* on the relationship between faith and reason. The Pope says that he really appraises 'positive results' of the Science, but it sometimes "seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them" [Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 14 September 1998, online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html]. If a scientist renounces the concept of mystery that transcends and simultaneously concerns and involves man and

limits himself to short-term and short-sighted targets, he then runs the risk that, “sundered from that truth, individuals would be at the mercy of caprice, and their state as person would end up being judged by pragmatic criteria based essentially upon experimental data, in the mistaken belief that technology must dominate all” [Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*].

This idea about the science reduced according to solely pragmatic criteria brings us to the second caveat: some acquisitions of the science can be used for the good but some can be misused and endanger someone’s rights or lives and sometimes even the whole mankind. This remains a grave ethical issue not only of the military research but also of many scientific disciplines as medicine, biotechnology, physics, informatics or cybernetics. In this perspective, Ambrose’s insistence that some acquired knowledge cannot be surrendered easily to the public seems much less ridiculous and nonsensical.

Faith, participating on the mystery of God, in fact “illuminates the material world” and “the gaze of science thus benefits from faith: faith encourages the scientist to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness” [Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_ enciclica-lumen-fidei.html]. In such words, the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* of Pope Francis, indebted also to the patristic tradition, develops a conviction already present in the Ambrose’s concept of *arcanum* that “faith awakens the critical sense by preventing research from being satisfied with its own formulae and helps it to realize that nature is always greater. By stimulating wonder before the profound mystery of creation, faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation.” [Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*].

We can thus perceive the originality of Ambrose’s complex understanding of the *arcanum* that has yet to be studied in the context of various Christian writers contemporary with Ambrose, starting from Tertullian, the ‘father’ of Christian Latin, and concluding with the Bishops close to Ambrose (Philastrus of Brescia, Zeno of Verona, Gaudentius of Brescia, etc.). Given the sources of Ambrose’s theology, further study could focus on Origen, Didymus and the Cappadocians as well. This understanding of faith may even prove to be inspiring for today’s fundamental theology because of its study of human knowledge of divine revelation and for sacramental theology, which researches the relation between baptism and faith.

References

- [1] C. Jacob, “Arkandisziplin”, *Allegorese, Mystagogie: ein neuer Zugang zur Theologie des Ambrosius von Mailand*, Hain, Frankfurt am Main, 1990.
- [2] T. Graumann, *Christus interpret. Die Einheit von Auslegung und Verkündigung in der Lukaserklärung des Ambrosius von Mailand*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin, 1994.

- [3] B. Studer, *Ambrogio di Milano, teologo mistagogico*, in *Vescovi e pastori in epoca teodosiana. In occasione del XVI centenario della consacrazione episcopale di S. Agostino, 396–1996. XXV Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana*, Istituto Patristico Augustinianum, Roma 1997, 569–586.
- [4] D. Vopřada, *Disciplina arcani ve výkladu žalmu 118 sv. Ambrože*, in *Antické křesťanství. Liturgie, rétorika, antropologie*, V. Hušek, P. Kitzler and J. Plátová (eds.), CDK, Brno, 2009, 35–52
- [5] D. Vopřada, *Fidus mysteriorum interpret. Il Commento al Salmo 118 di sant'Ambrogio come approfondimento mistagogico dell'iniziazione cristiana della Chiesa di Milano*, Doctoral Thesis, Istituto Patristico Augustinianum, Roma, 2012.
- [6] H. Savon, *Ambroise de Milan (340–397)*, Desclée, Paris, 1997, 32–36.
- [7] E. Dassmann, *Ambrosius von Mailand. Leben und Werk*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2004, 16–20.
- [8] Seneca, *Dialogi VI 25, 2*, E. Hermes (ed.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1996, 190.
- [9] Ovidius, *Epistulae IX 40*, R. Ehwald (ed.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1906, 105, 186.
- [10] Statius, *Thebais X 365*, A. Klotz & T.C. Klinnert (eds.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1973, 375.
- [11] Livius, *Ab Urbe condita XLII 17, 4*, J. Briscoe (ed.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1986, 73.
- [12] Plinius, *Epistulae 6, 22, 3*, M. Schuster (ed.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1958, 193.
- [13] Ovidius, *Fasti III 143*, E.H. Alton (ed.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1997, 57.
- [14] C.R. Philips, *Der Neue Pauly*, 12(2) (2003) 131.
- [15] Lucanus, *De bello civili VI 440*, D.R. Shackleton Bailey (ed.), Teubner, Stuttgart, 1988, 149.
- [16] Quintillianus, *Institutio oratoria XII 15*, L. Radermacher & V. Buchheit (eds.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1971, 70.
- [17] Horatius, *Epodi V 52*, D.R. Shackleton Bailey (ed.), Teubner, Stuttgart, 1995, 146.
- [18] Valerius Flaccus, *Argonauticon III 419*, W.W. Ehlers (ed.), Teubner, Stuttgart, 1980, 69.
- [19] G. Freyburger, *Étude sémantique et religieuse depuis les origines jusqu'à l'époque augustéenne*, Belles Lettres, Paris, 1986.
- [20] Plautus, *Trinummus 518*, G. Goetz & F. Schoell (eds.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1896, 29.
- [21] Plinius, *Naturalis historia VII 178*, vol. II, L. Ian & C. Mayhoff (eds.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1906, 62.
- [22] Tacitus, *Historiae III 38*, H. Heubner (ed.), Teubner, Stuttgart, 1994, 125.
- [23] Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes III 51*, M. Pohlenz (ed.), Teubner, Leipzig, 1918, 343.
- [24] J.-R. Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'Empire Romain. Contribution à l'histoire des rapports de l'Église et de l'État à la fin du quatrième siècle*, De Boccard, Paris, 1935, 473.
- [25] F.H. Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, Clarendon, Oxford, 1935, 701.
- [26] E. Dassmann, *Die Frömmigkeit des Kirchenvaters Ambrosius von Mailand. Quellen und Entfaltung*, Aschendorff, Münster, 1965, 165–168.
- [27] V. Monachino, *S. Ambrogio e la cura pastorale a Milano nel secolo IV*, Centro ambrosiano di documentazione e studi religiosi, Milano, 1973, 123.
- [28] H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. Bd. I. Schau der Gestalt*, 3rd edn., Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln, 1988.