

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT

Gregory is one of the most notable figures in Ecclesiastical History. He has exercised momentous influence on the doctrine, the organization, and the discipline of the Catholic Church.

Saint Gregory was born in Rome about the year 540. He was the son of Gordianus, a wealthy patrician, who owned large estates in Sicily and a mansion on the Caelian Hill in Rome, the ruins of which still await excavation beneath the Church of St. Andrew and St. Gregory. His mother, St. Silvia, was a native of Sicily. They had two sons Gregory and another whose name has not survived the ages. Two of Gregory's paternal aunts, Tarsilla and Emiliania, were also declared saints. It has been said that his education was that of a saint among saints. He loved to meditate on the Scriptures and to listen attentively to the conversations of his elders. He was devoted to God from his youth.

The religious atmosphere of his home was not the least of his educational influences. Young Gregory was undoubtedly influenced by the tumultuous events of this time. Between the years 546 and 552, Rome was first captured by the Goths and then abandoned by them. Next it was garrisoned by Belisarius, and again besieged by the Goths, who took it again.

Nonetheless, Gregory excelled in grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. He was so skillful as to be thought second to none

in all Rome. He must have gone through legal training as well, because his rank and prospects pointed him out naturally for a public career. He doubtless held some of the subordinate offices wherein a young patrician embarked on public life. He must have acquitted himself well, since Gregory was appointed by Emperor Justin the Younger as the Chief Magistrate of Rome even though he was only thirty-four years of age.

After the death of his father, Gregory went into a long period of prayer and inner struggle. He decided around 574 to abandon everything to become a monk. Once this decision was taken, he devoted himself to the work and austerities of his new life with all the natural energy of his character. His Sicilian estates were given up to found six monasteries and his home on the Caelian Hill in Rome was converted into another monastery under the patronage of St. Andrew. For about three years he lived in the Benedictine Monastery of St. Andrew. Here he himself assumed the monastic habit in 575, at the age of thirty-five. His mother, Silvia, retired to a solitary and quasi-monastic life in a little abode near the Church of St. Saba on the Aventine. It became her custom to send fresh vegetables to her son on a silver platter. One day, when Gregory found himself with nothing to give a poor beggar, he presented him with the platter. He referred to this period as the happiest in his life. His great austerities during this time probably caused the poor health from which he constantly suffered in later life.

Gregory was soon drawn out of his seclusion, when in 578, the pope ordained him, much against his will, as one of the seven deacons of Rome. The period was one of acute crisis. The Lombards were advancing rapidly toward the city, and the only chance of safety seemed to be in obtaining help from Emperor Tiberius at Byzantium. Pope Pelagius II accordingly dispatched a special embassy to Tiberius and sent Gregory along with it as his permanent ambassador to the Court of Byzantium. This appointment was made in 579 and it lasted for about six years.

Nothing could have been less congenial to Gregory than

the worldly atmosphere of the Byzantine court. To counteract its dangerous influence, Gregory followed the monastic life so far as circumstance permitted. This was made easier by the fact that several brethren from St. Andrew's accompanied him to Constantinople. With them, he prayed and studied the Scriptures. One result of this period remains his *Morals*, or series of lectures on the Book of Job. It was composed at the request of St. Leander of Seville, whose acquaintance Gregory made during his stay in Constantinople.

Much attention was attracted to Gregory by his controversy with Eutychius, Patriarch of Constantinople, concerning the Resurrection. Eutychius had published a treatise on the subject, maintaining that

the risen bodies of the elect would be "impalpable ... more light than air." Gregory objected and emphasized the palpability of Christ's risen body. The dispute became prolonged and bitter. At length, the emperor intervened. He summoned them both to a private audience where they argued their views. The emperor decided that Gregory was in the right and ordered Eutychius' book to be burned. The strain of the struggle had been so great that both fell ill. Gregory recovered but the patriarch succumbed, recanting his error on his death bed.

**"THE PROOF OF LOVE IS IN THE WORKS.
WHERE LOVE EXISTS, IT WORKS GREAT THINGS."
ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, 585 A.D.**

As far as obtaining help for Rome, Gregory's stay in

Constantinople was a failure. However, his period as ambassador taught him a lesson which was to bear great fruit later. It became clear that Rome could no longer expect any help from Byzantium. If Rome were to be saved at all, it would only be by vigorous independent action of the powers on the scene. This realization would inform Gregory's later actions with all its momentous consequences.

About the year 586, he was recalled to Rome. With the greatest joy he returned to St. Andrews and became abbot soon afterwards. The monastery grew famous under his rule, producing many monks who won renown. Gregory gave most of this time to lecturing on the Holy Scriptures. Eventually, he became the chief advisor and assistant of Pope Pelagius II.

In this capacity, Gregory wrote several important letters to the various churches.

The year 589 was one of widespread disaster throughout the empire. In Italy, the Tiber River overflowed its banks. The inundation carried away farms, houses, and numerous buildings, among them the granaries of the Church with all the store of corn. Pestilence followed on the floods, and Rome became a city of the dead. Business was at a standstill and the streets were deserted. Then in early 590, as if to fill the cup of misery to the brim, Pelagius II died. The choice of successor lay with the clergy and the people of Rome. Without any hesitation they unanimously elected Gregory, Abbot of St. Andrews. In spite of their unanimity, Gregory shrank from the dignity of the office. No doubt he realized that acceptance meant a final good-bye to the cloistered life he loved. He ultimately accepted and thus began those labors which have merited him the title of Great.

Fourteen years of life remained to Gregory, who was pope from 590 to 604. Into these years he crowded work enough to have exhausted the energies of a lifetime. What makes his achievements more amazing was his constant ill health. His zeal extended over the entire known world. He was in contact with all the Churches of Christendom. In spite of his

bodily sufferings and innumerable labors, he found time to compose a great number of works. He is known above all for his magnificent contributions to the liturgy of the Mass and the Divine Office.

At the outset of this pontificate, Gregory published his *Liber Pastorallis Curae*, the Book of Pastoral Care, on the office of a bishop in which he laid down the role he considered his duty to follow. This document is the key to Gregory's life as pope, for what he preached he practiced. It remained for centuries the textbook of the Catholic episcopate.

Gregory was not a man of profound learning, or a philosopher, or a conversationalist. He was a trained Roman lawyer and administrator, a monk, a missionary, a preacher, and a leader of men. His great claim to remembrance lies in the fact that he is the real father of the medieval papacy.

With regard to things spiritual, he impressed upon men's minds that the See of Peter was the one supreme, decisive authority in the Catholic Church. During his pontificate, he established close relations between the Church of Rome and those of Spain, Gaul, Africa, and Illyricum. His influence in Britain was such that he is justly called the Apostle of the English. In the eastern churches too, the papal authority was exercised with a

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frequency | unusual before this time. Even the Patriarch of Alexandria submitted to the pope's "command". The system of appeals to Rome was firmly established. The pope is found to veto or confirm the decrees of synods, to annul the decisions of patriarchs, and inflict punishment on ecclesiastical dignitaries precisely as he thinks fit. Gregory claimed for the Apostolic See (which is the head of all Churches), and for himself as pope, a primacy not only of honor but of supreme authority or jurisdiction over the Church Universal.

His work regarding the temporal position of the Church was also significant. Seizing the opportunity which circumstances offered, he made himself in Italy a power stronger than the emperor, and established a political influence which dominated the peninsula for centuries. Gregory was credited with securing a lasting peace with the invading Lombards. From this time forth, the varied populations of Italy looked to the pope for guidance, and Rome as the papal capital continued to be the center of the Christian world.

Gregory's work as a theologian and Doctor of the Church is less notable. He did not introduce new developments, new methods, and new solutions to difficult problems. In the history of dogmatic development, he is, however, important for summing up the teachings of the earlier Fathers and consolidating it into a harmonious whole. It was because of this that his writings became

to a great extent, the *compendium theologiae*, or textbook, of the Middle Ages.

St. Gregory the Great is one of the four great Doctors of the Church. He died March 12, 604. He was initially entombed in front of the sacristy in the portico of St. Peter's Basilica. Since then his relics have been moved several times. The most recent relocation was by Pope Paul V in 1606, when they were placed in the chapel of Clement V near the entrance of the modern sacristy. There is some evidence that a portion of the relics were taken to Soissons, France, in the year 826. There are many miracles attributed to Saint Gregory's intercession.

PRAYER

God, You look upon Your people with compassion and rule them with love. Through the intercession of Pope Saint Gregory the Great, give wisdom to the leaders of Your Church.