

POPE GREGORY THE GREAT **(ca. 540 - 604 A.D.)**

“ . . . whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.”¹

—Mark 10:43-44

6th Century Italy. By the time St. Gregory became Pope in 590 A.D., the Roman Empire had been gone in Western Europe for more than 100 years. The disintegration of order in Italy, begun by the Empire’s fall, was completed by the Gothic Wars (535 - 553 A.D.)—a series of battles up and down the length of the Italian boot. These wars pitted the barbarian Ostrogoths against the forces of the eastern Roman Empire, which sought to recapture the former greatness, as well as the former territories, of Rome. Although the Empire eventually triumphed, she impoverished the Italian peninsula and exhausted herself in the effort. When the Lombards and their allies invaded Italy, in 568 A.D., they were able to wrest all of northern Italy from Empire control.

The Empire managed to retain Rome despite the Lombard invasion, but the city was hardly worth keeping. Once home to a million people during the height of the Roman Empire, Rome was now reduced to a mere 40,000 inhabitants, many of them poor. The famous Roman aqueducts no longer functioned, and the city’s great buildings were decaying. The rest of Italy was similarly devastated. Civil order, what there was of it, was maintained by regional and municipal powers. The one organization in Italy that still had the resources, the prestige, and the organization to impose some order was the Church. The Roman Catholic Church during this time was comparatively wealthy, the holder of vast land holdings given to her through the generosity (and often the fears) of the faithful. She was also attracting many of the most brilliant minds in and around Italy, because the alternatives were few and often unappealing.

The Church assumed numerous functions which had previously been performed by the government. The Church became society’s social safety net, taking care of the poor, the sick, widows, and orphans. Her leaders often dispensed justice, and thus needed men-at-arms to enforce their decisions. Some bishops even had armies and bore arms themselves. As you would expect, the western Church’s growing worldliness led her to acquire the sins of the world. Many of her bishops and priests during this time indulged freely in such sensual pleasures as food, alcohol, and women. The Church thus found herself in desperate need of both a

capable administrator and a strong moral leader. She would find both in Pope Gregory I, also known as Gregory the Great.

Gregory's Early Life. Gregory was born in Rome in about 540 A.D to a patrician father, Gordianus. Gregory's ancestors included Roman senators, a Pope,² and many devoted Christians; his mother, Silvia, and two of his aunts³ were eventually canonized as saints. The family could also boast of great wealth, most of it in Sicily. When his father died, Gregory inherited that wealth. In 573 A.D., he filled the highest civil office in Rome: city prefect. But about a year later, he used most of his fortune to found seven monasteries—six of them in Sicily. The seventh was his former residence in Rome, on the Caelian Hill, which he renamed after St. Andrew. Gregory gave the rest of his money to the poor and retired to a monk's life at St. Andrew's. He spent three of the happiest years of his life there, practicing an extreme asceticism that damaged his physical health, but which seems to have aided his spiritual well-being.

Pope Benedict I⁴ called Gregory away from this spiritual bliss to serve the papacy. In 579 A.D., Pope Pelagius II⁵ dispatched Gregory as an ambassador to the eastern Roman Empire at Constantinople, where for seven years he lived the simple life of a monk amidst the luxury of the capital of the Empire. This experience taught him that he could not rely on the Empire, which repeatedly refused his requests for military aid against the encroaching Lombards in Italy. Gregory wrote much of his *Magna Moralia*⁶ while residing in Constantinople (although he completed and published it in Rome). In about 586 A.D., Gregory returned to Rome to serve as secretary and chief advisor to the Pope, and as abbot of St. Andrew's. He remained in these positions until 590 A.D., when Pope Pelagius II perished during an epidemic of the bubonic plague.⁷ Gregory was selected to succeed him as Pope. Reluctantly, Gregory left St. Andrew's again, never to return.⁸

Pope Gregory. As Pope, Gregory continued to live the simple life of a monk, but he was no simpleton. To reduce corruption, he appointed clerics to many of the posts previously held by laymen. His wise and humane administration of Papal properties⁹ increased Church revenues considerably, and he used these funds to relieve the poverty and suffering of the poor, to ransom prisoners of war, and to promote Christian institutions throughout western Europe. In 596 or 597 A.D., he sent monks from St. Andrew's as missionaries to Britain—where Christianity had almost died out after the defeat of the western Roman Empire there—and, together with Christians from Ireland, they won most of the people of Britain to Christ.¹⁰ The leader of that mission, Augustine,¹¹ became the inaugural Archbishop of Canterbury and established the first of many Benedictine monasteries in Britain. Gregory's efforts also helped restore northern Italy, Spain, and North Africa to orthodox Christianity.

When Gregory became Pope, the Papacy was still subject to the eastern Roman Empire, which ruled southern Italy. But his experience in Constantinople had taught him the weakness and unreliability of this power in Italy. So in 592, and again in 593, when wars broke out between the Empire and the Lombards of northern Italy, Gregory wisely made peace with the Lombards on his own. Indeed, Gregory made peace with his enemies whenever possible, but he also knew how to use war to his advantage when it became necessary. In his 14 years as Pope, he greatly increased both the territories and the prestige of the Papacy, and by the time of his death, the Pope had become the strongest power in Italy.

Gregory scrupulously protected the rights and titles claimed by or for the papacy, and insisted that the Pope held supreme authority over all Christians in the world—including those of the eastern Roman Empire. In Gregory's view, the pronouncements of a church council or synod were of no effect until, and unless, approved by the Pope. At the same time, he was a very humble man. He called himself *servus servorum Dei*—"the servant of the servants of God." Although Gregory did not originate the phrase, he certainly popularized it, and most subsequent Popes have adopted this description in reference to themselves.

Reformer. Gregory refused to tolerate hypocrisy and corruption within the Church. Simony and concubinage¹² had grown among the clergy, and Gregory labored to stamp out both, with moderate success. He fared better in restoring discipline to western monasteries, many of which had grown wealthy and worldly. Gregory succeeded, in part, by deposing corrupt abbots. To prevent interference from bishops who did not understand or appreciate monastic life, Gregory granted monasteries greater freedom to run their own affairs. However, he also required them to enforce discipline, and compelled monks to stay in a single monastery, to eliminate the problem of freeloaders who traveled from monastery to monastery, begging from each. To head off scandals, Gregory ordered that men's monasteries and women's convents could no longer be located close together.

He also encouraged the clergy to be good shepherds over their flocks. He required one-fourth of all tithes collected in each parish to be used to help the sick and the poor within that parish. He wrote stern letters to those Church leaders who neglected their duties, but was compassionate toward the weak and the repentant.

Writer and Pastor. Despite his many duties, Gregory also found time to write. His biography of St. Benedict of Nursia provides much of the information we have about that saint. Gregory wrote a manual to advise bishops about their duties: *Liber Pastoralis Curae*—i.e., Book of Pastoral Care (590 A.D.). He revised the liturgy of the Church. His name is associated with the "Gregorian Chants" (the religious music of the Middle Ages), although his role, if any, in their development is unknown.

As a pastor, Gregory was a product of his day. He believed the Second Coming of Christ was near, and preached fiery sermons about the never-ending miseries of Hell which he believed were in store for unbelievers. He also spoke often of Purgatory and the need for penance.¹³ He accepted at face value, and recounted, stories of miracles, visions, and prophecies, seemingly without regard for their credibility. He believed strongly in the power of relics,¹⁴ and treasured the chains which were said to have bound Peter and Paul. But Pope Gregory had a strong knowledge of the Bible, which he quoted constantly in his preaching. He admonished his flock to behave morally by avoiding the seven deadly sins (pride, avarice, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth), and adhering to the seven cardinal virtues: faith, hope, charity, wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. He was suspicious of the influences of pagan literature, such as the Roman classics, and warned his people to avoid them.

Pope Gregory protected the Jews within his territories, refusing to allow forcible conversions or theft of Jewish property—although he did use economic incentives to encourage Jews to voluntarily convert to Christianity. He did not always act with the same gentleness toward heretics and emperors, against whom he sometimes used stern language. He even brought in the secular authorities on occasion to suppress heresy. However, he resorted to force only as a last resort.

Theologian. As a theologian, Gregory embraced many of the teachings of Augustine of Hippo, including original sin. But he rejected Augustine's views on predestination. Gregory believed that people could conform their conduct to God's moral laws with the help of God's grace, as taught by the Council of Orange.¹⁵ While Gregory valued individuals, he rejected individual interpretation of the Bible, maintaining that the collective wisdom of the Pope and Church leaders should be heeded when the meaning of the Scriptures is in doubt. Gregory's vision of God was lofty indeed: "almost everything that is said of God is unworthy, for the very reason that it is capable of being said."¹⁶

Gregory's Legacy. Gregory became one of the greatest administrators the Church has ever produced. He stood for Christian values such as justice, charity, and morality, in a time when such virtues had largely fallen into disuse. He greatly increased both the power and the prestige of the Church. As one historian has said of him:

More than any other one man, Gregory laid the foundations for the power which the Church of Rome was to exercise in the Western Europe of the next nine centuries.¹⁷

Gregory did all of this despite constant poor health. He suffered from indigestion, fevers, and gout (a disease characterized by swollen and painful joints). During the last five years of his life, he was frequently bed-ridden, and often longed for death to relieve his suffering. On March 12, 604 A.D., that relief finally came. The Roman Catholic church later canonized him as a saint, and he became known as Gregory the Great. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes him as one of four original “doctors of the church.”¹⁸

Sources:

- (1) *The Story of Civilization, Volume 4 (The Age of Faith)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1950).
- (2) *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 (Beginnings to 1500)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (3) “Gregory I, Saint,” in *Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopedia* (1998 Edition).
- (4) The following articles in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:
“Pope St. Gregory I (‘the Great’)”:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06780a.htm>.
“Maurice”: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10069a.htm>
“Pope Benedict I”:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02427c.htm>
- (5) The following articles in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*:
“Gothic War (535-552”:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_Wars
“Justinian I”: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justinian_I
“Lombards”: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lombards>
“Doctor of the Church”:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_of_the_Church
- (6) “Maurice,” in *De Imperatoribus Romanis, An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors*, found at:
<http://www.roman-emperors.org/mauricius.htm>

Endnotes for “Pope Gregory the Great”:

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation.

² Gregory was the great-grandson of Pope Felix III, who was Pope from 483 to 492 A.D.

³ Tarsilla and Æmiliana, who were sisters of Gordianus.

⁴ Pope Benedict I was Pope from June 2, 575 until his death on July 30, 579 A.D.

⁵ Pelagius II was Pope from 579 to 590 A.D.

⁶ This book discussed many religious topics, in the context of the Book of Job.

⁷ A major cause of the epidemic was a terrible flood of the Tiber River in 589 A.D., which destroyed homes, buildings, and food supplies.

⁸ According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Gregory wrote to the Emperor of the eastern Roman Empire, Maurice (a/k/a Mauricius or Matricius, eastern Roman Emperor, 582-602 A.D.), who had to approve the papal selection, asking him to veto the choice of Gregory as Pope. However, the prefect of Rome, Germanus, refused to forward Gregory’s letter, and instead simply requested the Emperor’s confirmation of Gregory as Pope—which of course was granted. Gregory was consecrated as Pope on September 3, 590.

⁹ Land owned by the Catholic Church at this time may have been as much as 1,800 square miles, and was located in Sicily, southern Italy, Africa, and elsewhere.

¹⁰ Gregory was prompted to send missionaries to Britain by a meeting he had with some English youths in Rome before becoming Pope. Gregory in fact intended to go to Britain himself, and obtained permission from Pope Palagius II to do so, but was recalled to Rome before he could even leave Italy.

¹¹ This is not the famous Augustine of Hippo, who had died in 430 A.D. (The life of Augustine of Hippo is discussed in the article, “St. Augustine,” on this web site.)

¹² Simony was the practice of buying and selling Church offices (named after Simon the Magician, who sought to buy the gifts of God; see Acts 8:18-23). Concubinage was the taking of a mistress by bishops and priests, who were forbidden to marry. Both simony and concubinage would continue to be problems for the Roman Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages.

¹³ In Gregory’s time, the Church taught that believers must be further purified in Purgatory before they could be admitted to Heaven. Some Medieval views of Purgatory were quite frightening—almost like a Hell for believers, except that escape was possible. Gregory envisioned it as a fire

which refined the believer, disciplining him and purging him of any remaining sins.

“Penance” is the performance of some act or acts to atone for sins and to demonstrate the sincerity of repentance. Penance was usually assigned by the priest to whom sin had been confessed, and could entail either private or public acts of repentance. Gregory, like many other Church leaders in the Middle Ages, believed that even sins that God has forgiven must be atoned for, through penance in this life or through suffering in Purgatory in the next life—or possibly through both.

¹⁴ Relics are items associated with famous saints of the Church, especially those of the apostles and other 1st century Christians. Relics could include, for example, clothing, accessories, and even bones and other body parts. During the Middle Ages, miraculous powers—such as healing and protection—were claimed for many relics.

¹⁵ The Council of Orange was a Church synod (council) in 529 A.D. It affirmed the concept of original sin and declared that man can turn to God only through God’s grace. However, the synod rejected Augustine’s view that some are predestined to be condemned. The Synod held that all who are baptized are capable of achieving salvation “if they labor faithfully.”

¹⁶ From Gregory’s *Magna Moralia*, as quoted by Durant’s *Story of Civilization Vol. IV*, p. 523, from *Gregory the Great, Vol. 2*, by F. H. Dudden (London 1905), p. 313.

¹⁷ See Latourette’s *A History of Christianity (Volume I)*, at page 339.

¹⁸ A *doctor ecclesiae* is a canonized saint who is recognized by the Roman Catholic Church for his or her religious scholarship. The Catholic Church currently recognizes 33 Doctors of the Church.” The original *doctors ecclesiae*, so named in 1298 A.D., were Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory. You can read more about the first three of these in the articles on “St. Augustine” and “Ascetics of the 4th Century A.D.” at this web site.