

POPE LEO THE GREAT (d. 461 A.D.)

Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.¹

—Ephesians 6:10-11

Rome Imploding. The Western Roman Empire² of the 5th century A.D. was a shell of the Empire's former greatness. Corruption filled the government, which taxed its citizens so heavily that some fled beyond the Empire's borders to live among the "barbarians." Rome's economy—dependent for so long on the wealth of its conquered territories—was being wracked by the gradual loss of those possessions. The use of mercenaries had debilitated the once-invincible Roman Army. Rome sought peace through gold rather than by military might, paying some of the barbarian leaders to remain outside the Empire's borders. In the 5th century A.D., this sorry state of affairs quickly unravelled.

In 406 A.D. the Vandals invaded Gaul (France)—plundering its wealth, burning its cities, and murdering many of its inhabitants. They moved on to Spain in 409 A.D. and did the same there until they were routed by the Visigoths (who were allies of Rome), in 420 A.D. Defeated in Spain, the Vandals crossed over into North Africa, where they allied themselves with the Moors and the Donatists.³ This overwhelming force easily defeated the Romans, capturing and sacking Carthage in 439 A.D. Meanwhile, the Goths invaded Italy in 408 A.D., led by their king, Alaric. Two years later (410 A.D.), the Goths sacked Rome itself. But yet to come was the most frightening barbarian of all.

Attila the Hun. Attila became the sole ruler of the Huns⁴ in 444 A.D. He was the most powerful—and the most feared—man in the Europe of his time. Stories of his cruelty were so frightening that Christians called him the "scourge of God." Both the eastern and western branches of the Roman Empire paid him tribute to keep him from attacking. But when the emperor in the West, Valentinian III,⁵ stopped paying tribute in about 450 A.D., Attila invaded Gaul with an army of 500,000 men. Only the combined armies of Rome and the Visigoths stopped his advance, achieving a draw against him in one of the deadliest battles in history, on the Catalaunian Fields. Having been stalemated in Gaul, Attila invaded Italy in 452 A.D. He destroyed the city of Aquileia, captured Verona, collected tribute from Milan, and advanced on Rome. No army remained in his way—only a Pope.

Leo and Attila. Leo (also known as Pope Leo I and Leo the Great) grew up in the Italian city of Volterra, about 35 miles southwest of Florence, in the province of Tuscany. He was educated as a priest, rose to the position of senior deacon by 430

A.D., and was an advisor to Pope Xystus III. Leo became bishop of Rome (another name for the Pope) in 440 A.D., when Xystus died. For 21 years, Leo was one of the strongest and ablest Popes in history. His most famous test came when he was confronted by the mighty Attila.

As Attila approached Rome, Pope Leo and two Roman officials went to meet him, unarmed. To their surprise, Attila welcomed them. Leo then spoke with Attila in private, and somehow convinced him to withdraw. The Huns retreated to Hungary, where Attila died the following year, 453 A.D. Since neither Leo nor Attila ever disclosed the substance of their discussions, no one knows exactly what Leo said or how he convinced Attila to leave.

Leo and the Vandals. Two years later the Vandals of North Africa sailed to Italy with a huge fleet and threatened Rome. As with the Huns, the Roman military was powerless to stop them. But Pope Leo met with the Vandal King, Gaiseric, and exacted a promise that the city would be spared any violence or destruction, and that the Christian churches would be left alone. The Vandals looted the city and captured some of its citizens as slaves, but they kept their promise by refraining from murder, rape, torture, and arson. After the Vandals left, Leo helped feed the now impoverished people of Rome.

The bravery of Pope Leo in the face of these dangers contrasted sharply with the cowardice of the emperor and government officials, who cringed and often fled before the invaders. Leo's courage greatly enhanced the prestige and reputation of the Church in the West, and paved the way for her to assume greater leadership in civil, political, and cultural fields during the Middle Ages. The courage of Leo and other Christians also helped convert the invading barbarians to Christianity and safeguard much Church property.

The "Robber Synod." As a theologian, Pope Leo was instrumental in the Church's eventual victory over the Monophysite heresy. This heresy was started by a man named Eutyches, who led a monastery in Constantinople. Eutyches asserted that Christ was only divine, and not human—contrary to the accepted Church teaching that Christ had two natures, one human and the other divine. Leo opposed the Monophysites in a writing called the Tome. At a council held in Ephesus in 449 A.D., Leo's Tome was denied a fair hearing—indeed, the council refused to even read it. Amid threats from delegates and intimidation by the Emperor of the Eastern Empire, the council endorsed Monophysitism and excommunicated Leo. One opponent of Eutyches was beaten so badly that he died not long after the council ended. Leo, shocked by his representatives' reports, labeled this council the "Robber Synod." Two years later, in 451 A.D., a fairer and more representative church council met at Chalcedon (across the Bosphorus from Constantinople). This was the largest gathering of bishops the Church had yet seen, although virtually all were from the

eastern Empire. This council condemned Monophysitism and accepted Leo's position. Monophysitism quickly died out in most places, although it remained in Egypt and Syria until the 7th century A.D., when it was wiped out by the Arabs and Islam.

Leo's Influence. Pope Leo consistently argued for the primacy of the bishop of Rome as the head of the Christian Church worldwide. He based this reasoning on the role of Peter as the leader of Jesus' apostles. Leo believed that each bishop of Rome succeeded to Peter's authority.⁶ When the Chalcedon council accepted the co-equality of the bishops of Rome and Constantinople, Leo rejected the council's decision. The bishops in the West followed Leo's lead, as did the Western Roman Emperor, Valentinian III, who made Leo's primacy the law in the West. The Pope's authority today over all Roman Catholics in the world owes much to the efforts and influence of Pope Leo.

Pope Leo was also a voice of moderation and reason within the Church. While Leo supported monasteries, and even established some, he opposed the extreme views espoused by some monks who viewed all forms of business, commerce, and banking as inherently evil. Leo died on November 10, 461 A.D., and was later made a Saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

Sources:

- (1) *The Story of Civilization, Volume III: Caesar and Christ*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1944).
- (2) *The Story of Civilization, Volume 4 (The Age of Faith)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1950).
- (3) *A History of Christianity, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500* (Revised Edition), by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (4) *The Early Church*, by W.H.C. Frend (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1965, 1982).
- (5) *Lives of the Saints You Should Know*, by Margaret and Matthew Bunson (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, 1994).
- (6) *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, by William Steuart McBirnie, Ph.D. (Living Books, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois, 1973)

Endnotes for “Pope Leo the Great”:

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

² Beginning at least as early as the Roman Emperor Valerian (ruled 253-260 A.D.), many of the Emperors had found it useful to divide responsibility for governing the Empire. Valerian appointed his son, Gallienus, to rule in the West, while keeping the East for himself. While Diocletian reigned in the East (284-305), one of his generals, Maximian, was in charge in the West. By the time of Leo, these two halves of the Empire had become essentially independent of one another.

³ Donatists accepted the position of Donatus, Bishop of Carthage, who demanded that the Church remove the church leaders who had cowardly betrayed the faith during the Great Persecution. When the Church refused, Donatists set up rival churches, with rival bishops, throughout northern Africa. A Church council denounced the Donatist position in 314 A.D. For more on Donatism, see the paper on St. Augustine.

⁴ The Huns originally migrated from Mongolia and eastern Russia in about the 3rd century A.D. By 375 A.D. they had crossed the Volga River (which flows into the Caspian Sea) into western Russia. In Attila’s time, the Huns were established in Hungary and Germany, on the borders of the Empire, and had subordinated most of the Germanic peoples under their rule.

⁵ Valentinian III was the Western Roman Emperor from 425 to 455 A.D.

⁶ Leo’s argument relied heavily upon Matthew 16:17-19, which says:

And Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Many in Leo’s day, and many since then, doubted the validity of Leo’s argument in favor of the primacy of the bishop of Rome. For example, William Steuart McBirnie, in *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, p. 45, says the following:

Dr. Schofield’s footnotes are correct when he comments as follows: “There is in the Greek, a play upon the words Thou are Peter (Petros—literally, ‘a little rock’ or ‘pebble’) and upon this Rock (Petra) I will build my church. He does not promise to build His church upon Peter, but upon Himself, as Peter himself is careful to tell us.” (I Peter 2:4-9)