



# St. Gregory the Great

BORN 540; DIED 604  
POPE AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH  
FEAST DAY: SEPTEMBER 3

**B**ORN INTO WEALTH AND PRIVILEGE, the man who became St. Gregory the Great was on top of the world before he was thirty-five. He gave up the world, and gained Heaven.

Gregory was born into a noble Roman family of saints and Church leaders. His father was Gordianus, a Roman Senator and regional administrator whose two sisters are canonized saints; his mother Sylvia is also a canonized saint. Pope St. Felix III and Pope St. Agapitus I were distant relatives.

One of the wealthiest men in Rome and extremely well educated, Gregory quickly rose to a place of prominence as a public servant, achieving the position of Prefect of Rome, the highest civil office in the city, in his early thirties. He held this position for five years but, devoted to God from his youth, heard the Lord's call. After much prayer and struggle he chose the monastic life. He made his family's home into the monastery of St. Andrew, and founded six other monasteries on family lands in Sicily. The few years he lived as a humble monk, probably following the Rule of St. Benedict, were the happiest of his life.

Yet Gregory was not permitted to remain behind the quiet walls of a monastery. Within three years, Pope Pelagius II called upon him to accept ordination as a deacon, which he did not wish to do, and sent him on a diplomatic mission to the emperor in Constantinople. After six years and the failure of his mission, he was recalled to Rome and named abbot of St. Andrew. Yet the Pope continued to call on his formidable skills, making Gregory his secretary and most trusted advisor. Upon the death of Pelagius in a plague four years later, Gregory was elected to succeed him. He was then fifty and accepted his election with great reluctance, and always mourned this event.

Gregory's first papal act was to hold processions to petition God to end the plague. There is a



story that the Archangel Michael was seen in a vision sheathing his sword above Hadrian's Mausoleum near the Vatican as the procession was passing; this story is the basis for the statute of St. Michael atop what is now called Castel de Sant' Angelo.

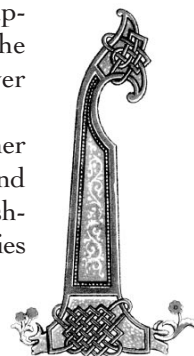
The impact of Gregory's thirteen-year papacy cannot be overstated. Ill most of the time from chronic indigestion — he became skeletally thin as death approached — and severe gout, he never rested. He instituted

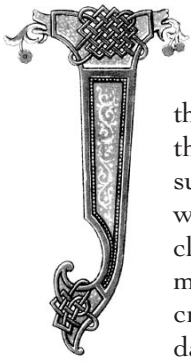
widespread reforms in Church discipline, contributed to the Church's liturgy, preached and wrote, promoted missions, fought heresy, and coped with the consequences of barbarian invasions.

The Western Roman Empire had been disintegrating under the onslaught of barbarian tribes for nearly two hundred years. During Gregory's childhood alone, Rome had been captured four times. By the middle of the sixth century, Italy lay a devastated battleground. Lombards (a tribe that eventually gave its name to a region in northern Italy) invaded when Gregory was a young man. The failures of civil authority forced Gregory as Pope to help to protect Italy from the invaders. He appointed governors to cities, provided military supplies for defense, instructed generals, and eventually negotiated a peace treaty.

Gregory also had to cope with the vast human misery created by the invasions. Captives had to be ransomed. Rome was filled with refugees who had to be fed and sheltered. He created an enormous program of charity to feed the hungry not just in Rome, but throughout Italy. With great skill, Gregory managed the Church's estates, which provided the food and finances for this work; in his great compassion, he emptied the Church's coffers. At the same time, he was in frequent conflict with the emperor over ruinous taxation of the population.

The breadth of Gregory's work as a reformer reached into every area of Church discipline and worship. He wrote a treatise on the duties of bishops, *Liber pastoralis curae*, that was for centuries





the standard textbook on the episcopacy. He ensured that unfit bishops were removed, enforced clerical celibacy, and removed clerics guilty of crimes or giving scandal. He promoted monasticism and established guidelines for monastic life. He supported bishops in their spiritual jurisdiction over monasteries but at the same time protected monasteries from overreaching bishops.

Gregory's changes in the Mass included fixing the time when the Our Father was prayed, extending singing of the "Alleluia" to every season of the liturgical year except Advent and Lent, and adding the petition "Grant us your peace in this life, save us from final damnation, and count us among those you have chosen" to the Roman Canon (now called Eucharistic Prayer I) — perhaps a reflection of the sad times in which he lived. He contributed prayers to what was later assembled as the "Gregorian" Missal (the book of the prayers of the Mass). His name is also given to the most widely-used chant form in the Church and, while he may not have created Gregorian chant, he strongly promoted it.

Gregory also strengthened papal primacy as the Church's supreme authority. At the same time, he sought to maintain union with Eastern churches and was careful not to interfere with rights of patriarchs and bishops anywhere. Nevertheless, he protested against the assumption of the title of "Ecumenical Patriarch" by the Patriarch of Constantinople as appearing to be arrogant. Above all other titles, he preferred for himself the one he was the first to use: "Servant of the Servants of God." A monk at heart, he simplified the papal court and made it similar to life in a monastery.

Gregory also had the heart of a pastor. He established "stational" churches to which great crowds would process. Mass would be celebrated and he would preach, mostly on Sacred Scripture.



*Symbol of the authority of the Pope:  
Crossed keys and the tiara*

***"Through Gregory,  
the papacy became the  
one rock of stability  
in Western Europe."***

ings of the Fathers of the Church.

Although Gregory sent evangelizing missions to Gaul and worked to stamp out heresy in Africa and schism in northern Italy, he most deeply cared about bringing the faith to the Angles of Britain. It is told that once, before he was elected pope, he saw three boys from Britain in Rome (who may or may not have been slaves for sale) and asked to what tribe they belonged. He was told that they were Angles and, so the story goes, he replied that, rather, they were angels — and resolved to become a missionary to Britain. He soon left Rome but, three days into his journey, the Roman population forced him to return. In 596, he sent St. Augustine of Canterbury and forty monks from St. Andrew's monastery to begin the evangelization of Britain.

Gregory's sense of justice also led him to help Italy's Jews when they were mistreated. He opposed compulsory baptisms and supported freedom of worship. When a Jewish convert to Catholicism turned a synagogue in Sardinia into a church, he ordered that the building be restored as a synagogue.

The last two years of this holy monk's papacy were those of great physical suffering and sorrowful concern for the future. Yet through Gregory, the papacy became the one rock of stability in Western Europe, especially in the twilight of the seventh and eighth centuries. He was one of the greatest popes of all time.

