

St. Leo the Great

BORN BETWEEN 390 AND 400; DIED 461
POPE AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH
FEAST DAY: NOVEMBER 10

GOD raises up extraordinary men and women in his Church. They are not extraordinary just because they have outstanding natural gifts.

They are extraordinary because of something called grace, divine life, a divine energy. Such a gifted man was Pope St. Leo the Great.

Leo was born in either Rome or the region of Tuscany, Italy, but the date of his birth is at best an estimate. He received a good education in Rome, but little is known of his life until he was of early middle age. He had been ordained a deacon by no later than 432. He may have had postings as a diplomat, and in 440 was in Gaul (modern France) to settle a quarrel between two Roman generals that threatened the region's defenses against the barbarians. He was there when he was elected pope that same year.

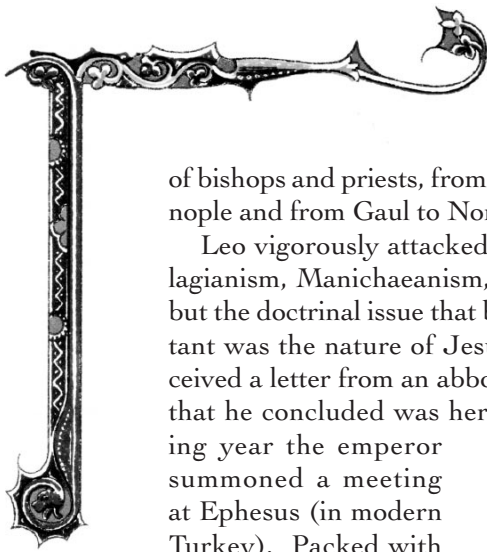
Leo's twenty-one years as pope occurred during a period of tremendous peril within both the Church and the Roman Empire. The Church was beset with heresies of all sorts. The Western Roman Empire was crumbling. Leo was the perfect man for the time: wise, firm, never discouraged, and always unruffled. He was the unconquerable bastion of the 5th century.

Leo began his pontificate with an innovation: he preached nearly a hundred sermons to the Roman faithful, teaching them orthodox doctrine, especially about the Incarnation; stressing almsgiving and other elements of charity and social justice; and refuting the heresies of the time. His first actions were thus those of a shepherd of his people.



St. Leo the Great, by Timothy Schmalz

Yet Leo was not only the Bishop of Rome, but the successor of Peter. His deep understanding of papal primacy as the unifier of the Church and transmitter of Sacred Tradition shaped how he carried out the duties of his office. His letters show the papacy's role in handling disputes within the Church, both having to do with the exercise of office and in teaching the faith handed down from the apostles. In one letter, he mentions the "ancient tradition" of the right to appeal to Rome. Letters addressed to him show the same understanding on the part



of bishops and priests, from Spain to Constantinople and from Gaul to North Africa.

Leo vigorously attacked the heresies of Pelagianism, Manichaeism, and Priscillianism, but the doctrinal issue that became most important was the nature of Jesus. In 448, Leo received a letter from an abbot in Constantinople that he concluded was heretical. The following year the emperor summoned a meeting at Ephesus (in modern Turkey). Packed with the abbot's supporters who endorsed the heresy, they astonishingly engaged in physical violence against the Patriarch of Constantinople. Leo's letter to the meeting stating the correct doctrine — that Jesus has a fully human nature and a fully divine nature, joined together in a single divine person — was not allowed to be read. He declared the meeting invalid, calling it the "Robber Synod." Two years later, a new emperor whose faith was free of heresy convened the Council of Chalcedon (also in modern Turkey), at which Leo's letter was read. The bishops rose in acclamation: "Peter has spoken through Leo!"

In addition to his indispensable role in establishing correct doctrine at Chalcedon, Leo taught the beauty and mystery of the Incarnation through his writings. As Peter's successor, he was repeating Peter's affirmation to Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). Leo's elevation of Christmas to a high-

er-ranked feast in the Church's liturgical calendar was a thoroughly pastoral application of this theological truth. To strengthen the faithful's appreciation of the vital necessity of the papacy, he also established the Feast of the Chair of Peter (celebrated on February 22).

The great threat of the barbarian tribes to Rome occurred in 452 and 455. The army of Attila the Hun had been cutting a path of destruction through Europe for nearly twenty years. Leo met Attila outside Rome and, through negotiation and an annual tribute, persuaded Attila not to sack Rome and to leave Italy.

Three years later, he persuaded the Vandal leader Genseric merely to pillage Rome but not to murder its citizens or burn the city. Leo then sent priests to care for the spiritual needs of those whom the Vandals had carried off to North Africa, sending with them alms and money to purchase the captives' freedom.

No one should conclude that Leo was more administrator than shepherd, more monarchical than pastoral. He defended the weak and persecuted, paid careful attention to the qualifications and training of priests, forgave wrongs, and lived a life of deep spirituality. He died a pope who was loved and venerated by all in Rome, and even by emperors and barbarians. He was truly a man of God and a great servant of the Church.

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