

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of St Gregory the Great
September 3, 2018

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A Feast of Title is always a happy occasion. A feast of title means that a group of Christ's faithful have decided to place their worship and work, for the spread and extension of Christ's Kingdom, under the protection and care of some aspect of the Lord's work, or as is so often the case, under the care and protection of a specific saint of the Church. In this way a feast of title is an affirmation of, and a logical outcome of, our belief in the communion of the saints. We are all in this together.

I cannot help but observe how happy is the connection between the patron saints chosen for the original Anglican Use work in Boston and the one chosen for the Ordinariate community, and how happily blended they are into one parish family. Saint Athanasius and Saint Gregory are two of the eight illustrious Doctors of the Greek and Latin Church. And I recall the amusing but perceptive observation of my seminary colleague Fr. George Rutler who once remarked, "Anglicans become Catholic for *theological* reasons and Catholics become Anglican for *glandular* reasons."

Yes indeed: it was for theological reasons. And it was the Catholic Church's appreciation of the Anglican patrimony which laid the foundation for bringing the expression of the faith we inherited under the protection of the Holy See. Saint Athanasius, at one point, only had the Holy Father as a true colleague; and Saint Gregory became the Roman Pontiff and in that capacity "the Apostle to the English," in the Venerable Bede's wonderful phrase.

Gregory was not a great and original thinker. He did not have the intellectual brilliance of Athanasius or Augustine, or the vast and solid learning of Jerome. Gregory's greatness was more like that of another Latin Doctor of the Church, Saint Ambrose. With Ambrose, Gregory distilled the ideas, teaching, and wisdom of the earlier Fathers and applied them to the practical needs of the Church and the world in their own day. Gregory's greatness was in his Roman genius for administration. He was the right man at the right time, when Byzantium was growing weak and ineffective. The Holy Father took charge not only of his own diocese, the Papal States and metropolitan district but, thanks to his love for Christ's Church and the organizational skills he possessed, Gregory gradually exercised a patriarchal rule over the whole of the West and as far east as Greece. And this was not only in ecclesiastical affairs but in civil administration as well — the notion of a separation of sacred and profane came along centuries later.

This greatness in Pope Gregory recognized the unique importance of an out-of-the-way and backward island called "England;" and you know the story of his sending

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forty of his monks on mission there. What you may not know is that Gregory had thoroughly prepared for the success of this mission. His stature was great among the Catholic Frankish people in Gaul. He consulted the King and Catholic Queen of Kent on his plans and also the Bishop of Arles. Gregory sent letters of introduction for his monks to use along the way.

To Gregory's credit go his role in the development of the Roman liturgy, but the extent of his role is now debated. Gregory's name has always been associated with Church music, though much of the development of what is called "Gregorian Chant" came later. The Pope's most original work, *Pastoral Care*, was one of the first works translated into (Old) English, by none other than King Alfred the Great, and the Byzantine Emperor Maurice had it translated into Greek and encouraged its influence in the East as well as the West.

In all these ways and more Saint Gregory the Great crowned the work of the other great Doctors of the Church. Together they made possible the transition of the Church from the classical world to that which would follow it; and by his gifts and force of personality saw to it that the new world was nearer the pattern of the Kingdom of God.

English Catholicism will always have an important devotion to Saint Gregory the Great. He was called from of old "Our father and apostle in Christ." And Gregory was venerated as "He from whom we have received the Christian faith, he who will present the English people to the Lord on the Day of Judgement as their teacher and apostle. "*Holy Gregory, pray for us.*