

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on the Feast of Saint Gregory the Great
Feast of Title of the Ordinariate Congregation in Boston
September 3, 2019

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“Now I am in this place tossed by such billows of this world that I am in no way able to steer into port the old and rotten ship over which, in the hidden dispensation of God, I have assumed the guidance. Now in front of me the billows rush in; now at the side, masses of foam swell up; now from behind, the storm follows on. And in the midst of all this I am sometimes compelled to steer in the very face of the opposing waters, and sometimes by turning aside to avoid the threat of the billows. The rotten planks already sound of shipwreck.” That may sound like the diary entry of a modern-day Holy Father, but it was written by Pope St Gregory the Great to his closest friend, Bishop Leander of Seville.

Pope Gregory had given up success in the civil service to become a monk, and he believed the monastic-contemplative life was the pinnacle of Christian discipleship. Indeed, he once ruled that a secular (or non-religious) priest entering the monastic life should give up exercising the priestly ministry! It was when he was Abbot of St Andrew’s Monastery in Rome that Gregory first became interested in a mission to England. Events beyond Gregory’s control delayed the project. When the Holy Father died in 590, Abbot Gregory was the universal choice to succeed him. But Gregory wrote to Emperor Maurice in Constantinople to be excused. Tampering with the mails goes way back! The Prefect of the City of Rome *intercepted the letter*. The Roman senate, clergy, and populace then sent *another letter* to the emperor, asking for Gregory’s appointment. And the rest is history.

Each of the early church fathers had a particular gift used for the benefit of the whole church. Origin was the pathfinder, Clement of Alexandria was a scholar, and much later, Augustine had a remarkable theological brilliance. Jerome possessed solid learning, Athanasius was the staunch defender of the faith, and Ambrose was the preeminent statesman. Gregory the Great brought a different gift. He was “*the prelate*” in the best sense of the word. He popularized and communicated the gifts of his predecessors with his genius for popular expression.

The world was being remade when Gregory was Pope. The Eastern end of the empire was becoming slack and weak. Gregory had vision to see an opportunity.

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He opened the boundaries of Catholicism. His interest in England and securing it for the Catholic Church, was part of that vision. But one event, actually preceding his pontificate, stands out as the bellwether for all to follow. In the 580s Rome was in bad shape. The Lombards sacked the city at will; there was constant famine, and frequent plague, and these problems were acute. So while still an abbot, Gregory organized a series of processions that sang Litanies as a special act of intercession. The spectacle must have been magnificent. Each of the seven archdeaconries in the city provided people for a procession, and each started from a separate church. The order of procession for each was: abbesses and nuns, children, married women, abbots and monks, widows, clergy, and laymen. The seven processions all converged on the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore for a final great service of supplication for the relief of the city. And this magnificent ceremony made a great impression upon the citizenry of Rome, the barbarians, and other visitors. More than any other single act, this procession is the perfect example of how ecclesiastical Rome took the place of the old pagan empire as the center of the civilized world.

Gregory the Great was a monk at heart, and he had deep misgivings about any monk becoming a bishop let alone the Supreme Pontiff! But he cared for the institutional side of Catholicism, and at a time when secular and political institutions were in decay and crumbling, Pope Gregory provided the safety and moral authority of the Catholic Church. He was the right man at the right time. And it is not too much to say he set the Church and Europe on its course through the Middle Ages and the next fifteen hundred years. Holy Gregory, pray for us.