

Medieval Sourcebook: Bede: Gregory the Great

Tradition has assigned the name Great to only two Popes, Leo I (440-461) and Gregory I (590-604). The latter is often remembered for his efforts to promote the conversion of the English. The following account is from St. Bede's classic work (written before 731) on early English Church history.

In the year of our Lord 605, having ruled the apostolic Roman Church most illustriously for thirteen years, six months, and ten days, the blessed Pope Gregory died and was taken up to his eternal home in heaven. And it is fitting that he should receive special mention in this history, since it was through his zeal that our English nation was brought from the bondage of Satan to the Faith of Christ, and we may rightly term him our own apostle. For during his pontificate, while he exercised supreme authority over all the churches of Christendom that had already long since been converted, he transformed our still idolatrous nation into a church of Christ. So we may rightly describe him as our own apostle, for while others may not regard him in this light, he was certainly an apostle to our own nation, and we are the seal of his apostleship in the Lord.

Gregory was Roman-born, son of Gordian, and came of a noble and devout family. Felix, once bishop of the same apostolic see, a man of high distinction in the Church of Christ, was one of his ancestors, and Gregory maintained this family tradition by the nobility and devotion of his religious life. By God's grace, he employed his recognized worldly position solely to win the glory of eternal honour, for he soon retired from secular life and sought admission to a monastery. There he entered upon a life of such perfection in grace that in later years he used to recall with tears how his mind was set on high things, soaring above all that is transitory, and how he was able to devote himself entirely to the spiritual life. Remaining in the body, he could yet transcend its limitations in contemplation, and looked forward to death, which most men regard as a punishment, as the gateway to life and reward of his labours. He used to mention this, not in order to call attention to his increase in virtue, but lamenting the loss of virtue sustained in his spiritual life through his pastoral responsibilities. One day, in conversation with his deacon Peter, Gregory described his former spiritual state, then sadly continued: 'My pastoral responsibilities now compel me to have dealings with worldly men, and when I recall my former peace, it seems that my mind is bespattered with the mire of daily affairs. For when I am wearied by attention to the worldly affairs of numberless people and wish to meditate on spiritual things, I seem to approach them with unmistakably lessened powers. So when I compare what I now endure with what I have lost, and when I weigh that loss, my burden seems greater than ever.'

Holy Gregory spoke in this way from deep humility, yet we cannot help but feel that he lost none of his monastic perfection through his pastoral cares, and gained greater merit by his labours for the conversion of souls than in his former peaceful

life, especially since, even when he became Pope, he ordered his house as a monastery. When he was first summoned from his monastery, ordained to the ministry of the altar, and sent to Constantinople as representative of the apostolic see, he never abandoned his spiritual exercises, although compelled to mix with people of the Imperial court. For some of his fellow-monks were so devoted to him that they accompanied him to the Imperial city, and he began to maintain a regular religious observance with them. In this way, as he records, their example proved an anchor-cable that held him fast to the peaceful shore of prayer while he was tossed on the restless waves of worldly affairs, and his studies in their company enabled him to refresh a mind distracted by earthly concerns. He was not only strengthened against the temptations of the world by their fellowship, but inspired to ever greater spiritual activity.

When these companions urged him to write a mystical commentary on the often obscure book of Job, he could not refuse a task imposed on him by brotherly affection, which would be of help to many people. So he first gave a clear exposition of its literal meaning in thirty-five sections, and followed by showing how the book refers to Christ and the sacraments of the Church, and in what sense it applies to all the faithful. He began this work when Papal representative in the Imperial city, and completed it in Rome after he became Pope. It was during his stay in Constantinople that Gregory, a mighty champion of Catholic truth, suppressed at its birth a new heresy about our state at the resurrection. For Eutyches, bishop of that city, taught that our bodies will then be impalpable, more intangible than wind and air: but when Gregory heard this, he quoted the example of our Lord's Resurrection, and showed logically how this opinion was utterly opposed to the orthodox belief. For the Catholic belief is that the body is transfigured in the glory of immortality and refined by the operation of spiritual power, but remains palpable by reason of its nature. This is exemplified in our Lord's risen body, of which he said: 'Touch Me, and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see Me have.' In defense of the Faith, our venerable father Gregory contested this rising heresy so effectively that, with the help of the devout Emperor Tiberius Constantine, it was entirely suppressed, and no one has since been found to revive it.

Gregory also wrote a notable book, *The Pastoral Office*, in which he describes in clear terms the qualities essential in those who rule the Church, showing how they should live; how they should carefully instruct all their people; and how they should always bear in mind their own frailty. He also compiled forty Homilies on the Gospel, which he divided into two volumes. He wrote four books of Dialogues, in which at the request of his deacon Peter, he included the lives of the saints of Italy to serve as patterns of holy life for posterity. So whereas in his Commentaries he showed what virtues are necessary, in describing the miracles of the saints he made clear the potency of those virtues. In twenty-two homilies he also revealed the profound teaching latent in the early and latter parts of the prophet Ezekiel, which had hitherto remained very obscure. Further, he compiled a book of answers in reply to the questions of Saint Augustine, first bishop of the

English nation.... In conjunction with the bishops of Italy he also compiled the short Synodical Book, which deals with the administration of the Church. He also wrote a large number of personal letters. The extent of his writings is a source of amazement when one considers that throughout his youth he was often in agony from gastric pain, and frequently troubled by a slow fever. But in all these afflictions he reflected that holy scripture says: 'The Lord scourgeth every son that He receiveth', and the greater his worldly sufferings, the greater his assurance of eternal joy.

Much might be said of his imperishable genius, which was unimpaired even by the most severe physical afflictions; for while other popes devoted themselves to building churches and enriching them with costly ornaments, Gregory's sole concern was to save souls. He regularly gave whatever money he had to relieve the poor, in order that 'his righteousness might remain for ever, and his horn be exalted with honour.' . . . In addition to his deeds of kindness and justice, we should remember with gratitude how Gregory saved our nation from the grasp of the ancient Enemy by the preachers whom he sent us, and brought it into the abiding liberty of God. He was full of joy at its conversion and salvation, as he mentions in his Commentary on Job: 'The Britons, who formerly knew only their own barbaric tongue, have long since begun to cry the Hebrew Alleluia to the praise of God. The once restless sea now lies quiet before the feet of His saints, and its ungovernable rages, which no earthly princes could tame by the sword, are now quelled at the simple word of His priests in the fear of God. Heathen nations who never trembled before armed hosts now accept and obey the teachings of the humble For now that the grace of the knowledge of God has enlightened them and they see His heavenly truths and mighty wonders, the fear of God restrains them from their former wickedness, and they desire with all their hearts to win the prize of eternal life.' Gregory also tells how the holy Augustine and his companions guided the English nation to knowledge of the truth both by their preaching and their miracles.

Among many other matters, blessed Pope Gregory decreed that Mass should be said over the tombs of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul in their churches. He also introduced into the Canon of the Mass three excellent and valuable petitions: Order our days in Thy peace, preserve us from eternal damnation, and number us in the flock of Thine elect, Through Christ our Lord.

Gregory ruled the Church during the reigns of the Emperors Maurice and Phocas, and in the second year of the latter's reign he passed from this life and entered the true life of heaven. His body was laid to rest on March the fourth in the church of Saint Peter the Apostle before the sacristy, whence he will one day rise in glory with other shepherds of Holy Church. On his tomb was inscribed this epitaph: Receive, O earth, the body that you gave, Till God's lifegiving power destroy the grave. His heaven-bound soul no deadly power, no strife Can harm, whose death is but the gate of life. The tomb of this high Pontiff, now at rest, Recalls his life and deeds for ever blest. He fed the hungry, and he clothed the chill, And by his

message saved their souls from ill. Whate'er he taught, he first fulfilled in deed,
And proved a pattern in his people's need. To Christ he led the Angles, and by
grace To Faith and Church he added a new race. O holy pastor, all your work and
prayer To God you offered with a shepherd's care. High place in heaven is your
just reward, In triumph and in joy before the Lord.

I must here relate a story which shows Gregory's deep desire for the salvation of
our nation. We are told that one day some merchants who had recently arrived in
Rome displayed their many wares in the crowded market-place. Among other
merchandise Gregory saw some boys exposed for sale. These had fair
complexions, fine-cut features, and fair hair. Looking at them with interest, he
enquired what country and race they came from. 'They come from Britain,' he was
told, 'where all the people have this appearance.' He then asked whether the
people were Christians, or whether they were still ignorant heathens. 'They are
pagans,' he was informed. 'Alas!' said Gregory with a heartfelt sigh: 'how sad that
such handsome folk are still in the grasp of the Author of darkness, and that faces
of such beauty conceal minds ignorant of God's grace! What is the name of this
race?' 'They are called Angles,' he was told. 'That is appropriate,' he said, 'for they
have angelic faces, and it is right that they should become fellow-heirs with the
angels in heaven. And what is the name of their Province?' 'Deira,' was the
answer. 'Good. They shall indeed be de ira saved from wrath and called to the
mercy of Christ. And what is the name of their king?' he asked. 'Aella', he was
told. 'Then must Alleluia be sung to the praise of God our Creator in their land,'
said Gregory, making play on the name.

Approaching the Pope of the apostolic Roman see for he was not yet Pope himself
Gregory begged him to send preachers of the word to the English people in
Britain to convert them to Christ, and declared his own eagerness to attempt the
task should the Pope see fit to direct it. But this permission was not forthcoming,
for although the Pope himself was willing, the citizens of Rome would not allow
Gregory to go so far away from the city. But directly Gregory succeeded to the
Papacy himself, he put in hand this long cherished project and sent other
missionaries in his place, assisting their work by his own prayers and
encouragement. And I have thought it fitting to include this traditional story in the
history of our Church.

Source.

Bede: *Ecclesiastical history of the English People*

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Question to answer: What does this reading tell us about Gregory and the early church?