



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

St Gregory the Great – 3rd September

Ecumenist and pastor, father of the liturgy

Readings: 2 Corinthians 4: 1-2, 5-7, Ps 95, Luke 22: 24-30

We have, in recent centuries, had a lot of great popes. The Church, however, never formally accords this title to any of her servants. Popular piety and Church historians have named two and it maybe that we have lived through the pontificate of the third, Saint John-Paul II. Up to this point we have but two. Leo the Great is famous for riding out in 452 to meet Attila the Hun in the fields before Rome and persuading the killing machine, which had wasted Europe, to leave the Eternal City in peace. But he is also famous for his theological works which confirmed the Orthodox teaching of the Church in the great Tome of Leo, a volume that remains the bedrock of the Church's teaching and the summation of her wisdom from Apostolic times.

The next 'great' comes a century and a half later. His family estate runs up the Caelian Hill opposite the Palatine and, in the latter half of the sixth century, he converted it into a monastery. Today a Benedictine community still lives there and there is a convent of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by 'Mother' Saint Theresa. The original marble Cathedra of this great pope can be seen in a small side chapel off the main stanza and here one can kneel and touch history.

The pope in question, whose feast day is this weekend, was St. Gregory. His significance cannot be underestimated. His fourteen year papacy rings through

the centuries in every aspect of orthodox Catholic practice, ministry and mission.

Gregory was a son of privilege, a Roman senator at 30. His political judgement was acute. A monk who returned to public ministry, he was a deeply reflective and prolific spiritual writer. Those who follow the daily Office of Readings will, like me no doubt, rejoice every time we are treated to a piece from the great man.

Like Benedict XVI, Gregory has a way of making the complex accessible and the great matters of the Faith are revealed in the encounter with the praying heart of a holy soul. His work and wisdom are recognised by Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans in their calendars.

In his ecumenical endeavours he brought Spain and France back under Roman rule. Franks, Lombards and marauding Visigoths were retrieved from the heretical errors of Arianism and brought back into the universal fold of the Catholic Church – no mean feat in those wild and uncertain times.

Gregory is known as the Father of Christian worship. He is recognised in the Byzantine liturgy and his work is accorded primacy of place in the great document on the liturgy from the Second Vatican Council. *'The Church recognises Gregorian chant as especially native to the Roman liturgy.....it should be given pride of place in liturgical services'* (SC116). It is a touching irony that this great patrimony should be almost exclusively offered these days in Anglican cathedrals.

For us, in the far extremities of the Roman Empire, St. Gregory the Great has a special place in our hearts. It was Gregory who, moved by slaves from these

distant shores in the market place of Rome, determined to send a missionary expedition to Britannia and recapture for Christ these far off lands and bring both the struggling Christian outposts and the barbarian kingdoms into the fold of the Universal Church.

To that end he sent Augustine and the rest is history. At least it should have been. While the Gregorian mission obtained for a thousand years the great disruption of the Reformation and its feisty and blood soaked response by faithful Catholics ended, eventually, in a limited toleration and ghetto church, glad and relieved to be able to turn its prayer wheel in private.

In our time and at the exhortation of the Second Vatican Council, we need to renew our commitment to the great Gregorian imperatives that first brought this land to Christ.

We need to rediscover and re-present the profound teaching of the Faith in a way which speaks heart to heart to our people. That means education.

We need to take seriously the charge of every pope of my lifetime – to seek to bring back into unity the divided worshippers of Christendom under the universal shepherd. That is the goal of ecumenism.

Our worship needs to reclaim our full patrimony and speak of the beauty of Heaven and be a place where the deepest longings of the human heart are drawn to the altar of sacrifice. When a stranger enters he should be drawn by the transcendent mystery and the immanent attraction of the Real Presence and our attention to Jesus.

We need to be utterly committed to the Mission of the Church, to the salvation of man. Evangelism is not just for evangelicals. The Catholic Church is the original and enduring mission of Our Risen Lord.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls for a radical, painful, costly commitment to Him. Anything else, He tells us, will not serve as discipleship.

What Jesus asks us to do is to embark on the great adventure.

What St. Gregory the Great did, a millennium and a half ago, was to launch that adventure in our land.

We are those to whom the next chapter of this story is entrusted.

Can you think of a more exciting invitation or greater privilege?

St. Gregory the Great.....pray for us.

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