

## **Gregory the Great**

Gregory the Great was a man of truth and equality. He came from an era of turmoil and strife along the Roman border of Italy. He was born in 540 into a very wealthy family and he had a great great grandfather that was also a pope. Pope Felix III was his bloodline and his father, Gordianus, was a well known man among the management of churches. His mom, Silvia, was a Christian woman with a heart for God, but we do not have much information on her. His family was the true hold of the Caelian Hill in Rome. He shared great links with Anicia, a wealthy family. With two of Gregory's aunts being Saints, this influenced his education in a positive way. Known as saints among saints. He was a deep mediator of the written Word. He loved learning about life and lived it abundantly. With this being the case, it was not unrealistic that he became one of the best popes of the Roman Catholic Church. We are blessed to have so many writings of this outstanding man. The earliest biography was composed by an unknown source in the year of antiquity 700 AD.

His childhood was pleasant and fulfilling. He grew up in Caelian Hill of Rome. This covered Circus Maximus to pine covered Palatine Hill. Down through Palatino and Celio. There is story after story of Gregory in the walls of San Paolo e Giovanni. The site was where Gregory the Great's childhood home stood. Like Grabner speaks: Pope Gregory's home was converted into a monastery in his honor. He was an intelligent kid that always asked questions and wanted to know the joy in life. His mom and dad were a huge influence in his life and only added intelligence and joy to his life. His parents only wanted the best education known to man for their son Gregory. He saw the magic of childhood although he was raised in turbulent times. He yearned for like minded friends and was a nice child. He was well built and had a nice face. He had a head full of dark curly hair. He loved hearing stories shared by the elderly population. At

this young age he heard of Benedict's passing and wanted to know more. To some this might have been his first death experience. He was intrigued by stories of Benedict and his encounter with Gothic King Totila. Later he questioned if he too should go into solitude like Benedict. As he aged he started taking his Christianity to heart. He was a wealthy young man and when he learned that he had to sell his wealth and follow Christ he became sad. He asked God again and again only to hear the same answer. He worked day and night all over the city. He thought light hearted for the city of Rome and hoped to be able to fix any issues that surfaced. Some areas of Rome had no food or clean water. This brought back many memories of times with his mother as a child. He tried his hardest to help the poor and mend the sick. During this time he learned the love of God and his thoughts of being a priest deepened. His heart was for learning law, but he also had a love for nature. He traveled to Greece for quite some time and continued his education. Gregory wasted no time going for his fortune. The time had come for him to practice what he learned and place his education next to practical knowledge. Living as a monk he saw some blond young men become enslaved and this gave him heartbreak. He vowed then that he would care for the needy of the world. He had many questions as to why they were enslaved. One particular time he questioned this by saying: "What is the nationality of these lads?"<sup>1</sup> He was forced to step up and do what he knew God wanted him to do. There are some people who question if this ever took place or this was just the way and story that is told of why and how Gregory finally decided to take action in church life. There were even people who had not grasped this form of Christianity and Gregory the Great was the leader for this journey. The Scotch-Irish tradition was powerful and Gregory had to make a choice of which path to take.

Gregory was forced into office when a load of depression hit the area. He had a vision that only he could see and he went full force into being an outstanding representative of the

1 Gonzalez, Justo Vol 1-275

church. Lombards hit the city of Rome hard and this halted all communication to a standstill. They were a Germanic people that led revolt to the Italian peninsula. Knowing that he could not stand up to them, he regularly fought for peace and withdrew all his harsh ways. Rome and the East were not coming into a peace time soon enough. Gregory felt he was part of a Christian empire and this was seen as the holy commonwealth of his time. He felt he had done his part for peace on both sides of the fence. He kept peace in the church and in the secular world he led a peaceful life. The imperial policy during this time held no peace for Rome and this was not an easy step for him. He tried not to complain to the heads of the imperial army and he kept his peaceful demeanor as long as he could. Fortunately circumstances allowed him to intervene in the areas under imperial control. Gregory adopted the view of the Byzantine outlook and he marched forward with a happy heart. Although he felt that the gospel was supposed to be preached throughout the world, his first concern was peace for Rome. War was not even half of the fight Italy had to face. Many plagues swept the area and dooms day seemed more practical than a slice of heaven in the wake of a good human like Gregory could provide. The oldest ruling class were replaced by the ecclesiastical and military forces. Years before, like Markus shared: “Municipal authority was often concentrated in the hands of the bishop.”<sup>2</sup> Gregory was a communication professional in the wake of his first official job as a public life advocate. This was before he decided to go into a monastery to study the priest's life in 574. Pope John III also died and this left an opening in the church before Benedict took office the next year. There are no known facts as to what Gregory felt and how he took care of this event, but we do know that he stepped into office with power and might. He was a man of God and it showed. During his training years he led a group of Latin people and this gave him time to study and become familiar with what he needed to climb the ladder of success. He eventually returned to St.

2 Markus-Gregory the Great and His World-6

Andrew where he took on the title as Bishop of Rome. One interesting fact was that he was the first monk-pope. Some saw him as compulsive and not tight on his calling in life. He saw the Christian Confession of Faith needed humility and class and this could only be reached through commitment and ascetic detachment. He preached with eschatology and exegetic style. Since Gregory was a man of St. Andrews Church, he felt the need to dedicate a homily to St Andrew the Apostle. This was a hard homily to reach the congregation because it dealt with the Apostles and how they abandoned their orders on following Christ. He was distressed because he felt that people of his day were losing their zeal for Christ and he feared that they would end up being without hope in Christ. He then proceeded to end this message with a deep conviction to St. Andrew and wanted his parishioners to turn to the life and teachings of St. Andrew. He knew this would be a slow track to reform and he was willing to walk the walk and talk the talk. He felt that Christians would abandon their tradition. As Demacopoulos, the author of this particular book saw that Gregory was an ascetic preacher, being that he finds deep convictions and harsh love of The Catholic Church as the only way and the true way. He had a deep desire for his people to see this truth and follow it. Like Demacopulos stated: "...it is through discernment that one obtains the mystical insight of interpreting Scriptures properly." <sup>3</sup> He is a man of siphoning the ingredients of the spiritual and physical world and as he did he became one of the greatest Popes of all times. One piece of information that surprised me was learning that Gregory the Great was a suspicious man. You could never get over him easily. I guess this was an important quality to obtain for being a Pope for fourteen years.

We celebrate St. Gregory the Great saint day on September 3. This man was a force to be reckoned with. When he was ordained as a priest, he became one of the Pope's seven deacons. He sacrificed many of his own needs to help those less fortunate. He would have been happy

3 Demacopoulos, George E. "*Gregory the Great...*" 21

settling down into this role, but he stood the test of time and took a great leap of faith to step into his role of being pope. Something I found interesting was that he is known as the saint for England, Epilepsy, Musicians and Teachers. He told his mom in a report: “Don’t worry Mother,” Gregory replied, taking her hands in his own. “I know the weeds of the evil one grow rampant among the Lord’s faithful. Satan hates peace. God will stand by me.”<sup>4</sup> This gave his mom peace and she knew he was taking the right road.

Gregory was a solid person in the growth of the church. He planted much importance in the church life and showed the world that he knew his job and followed the Lord and the church rules and regulations. The work, which regards the bishop pre-eminently as the physician of souls, is divided into four parts:

- He points out in the first that only one skilled already as a physician of the soul is fitted to undertake the "supreme rule" of the episcopate.
- In the second he describes how the bishop's life should be ordered from a spiritual point of view;
- in the third, how he ought to teach and admonish those under him,
- and in the fourth way, in spite of his good works, he ought to bear in mind his own weakness, since the better his work the greater the danger of falling through self-confidence.<sup>5</sup>

Gregory followed these values and became the Pope of the Catholic Church in 590. He had boundless energy that even the lowest man questioned. Messengers carried letter after letter to his doorstep with needs throughout the city. Gregory had scribes that would help him write out his sermons and would help him figure out his thoughts on paper. The Church’s estate at this time had reached great dimensions. From the lessons of his father came into practice these values and the duty of the financial points of the church. He not only dealt fairly with the Roman church

4 Grabner, Sigrid In the Eye of the Storm -179

5 <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06780a.htm>

but he also had his hands in Protestant and Oriental churches that swung down from the Catholic roots. His reign as Pope was a huge learning experience for all that were involved in the church. It was epic for Papal service and a change for the church. He took his position as Pope very seriously and led by example and always had promising words to share and spread. There was never, “YOU.” He always included himself in the craziness of his world and always stood by his word. When the Lombards were not present Gregory would be seen preaching outside the city gates and he would stand and preach a fierce sermon. He wanted to reach the streets of Rome and be able to allow the country folks to hear his message as powerful as the city people. Most people knew his word was solid and did not look for empathy, but only a solid Word of God street sermon. One lesson I can learn from Gregory the Great is that he never cared if people liked him or his sermons, all he cared for was the Love of God and spreading His Word above all else. The Lombards were not an easy fate to face. Gregory time and time again had issues coming to the church door at times where he needed to face other challenges that surfaced. He knew that The Lombards were reckless and he needed to place other issues on the back burner and face the Lombards head on. He was a missions leader and loved to hear of his faith spreading and growing at great leaps. He took his responsibilities very seriously and this was a rule of thumb for him even in his secular world. This caused him great anxiety and distress. He was deeply committed to worldly affairs and always saw to completion of what he started. I admire his passion for Christianity, he was stuck between the secular and church for years but finally abolished his need for worldly desires and gave his soul to God in 573. He felt safe in the monastic life. He had a head of knowledge from that of a Jewish ideas and Greek Philosophical ideas to cover both areas of the Bible. He used a simile where he spoke of the church being built stone by stone and this is how we need to build up people. He likes following the way of the church. He also liked keeping division in the church in ways of having order via functions. He liked to use the word rector for representing bishops. One part of this research I found interesting is Gregory’s love toward Pastoral Care. He took his role as a priest extremely important and was kind to everyone he came across. Markus shares a quote of how he sees Gregory, he states: “Gregory’s image of the Church is that of a vast community of contemplation, its members ranked according to the level they are able to attain.”<sup>6</sup> This being said shows that he liked discipline and order. His

6 Markus-*Gregory the Great and His World*. 33

thoughts on this kept him from being one of the most intelligent men in his area. He was highly educated in traditional disciplines of Roman patrician. This I would think has him being in touch with the love of a father and his eagerness to learn their role and see them in their power had to inspire him. He was a great writer and wrote articles of information for the church as well as his sermons which he was hard on himself. To learn about his love of education you can dig down deep in his writings and see that he was pro education. The proof of this shines the brightest through his final paragraph in his dedicatory letter of *Moralia*. This holds a treasure of his fullest biographical potential. He also did a dedicated sermon on Job and he questioned the Pauline letters, making balance between Old and New Testament.

Pope Gregory was an ally with St Augustine and he became an important figure in his time. Gregory asked Augustine to be the Archbishop of the southern part of the British Isles. The Gregorian Mission also known as the Augustinian Missions were a big deal for the growth of Christianity. At first Augustine did not give much thought to Gregory. Markus speaks of this mission as a, “totalising discourse.”<sup>7</sup> Delegating the word light to his sermons, this led to some promising rewards for the duo. Nourishment was another word that he used to pull in people and use the rule of how they should read the Bible and learn the Word, today read a small bit and digest, tomorrow review and read a little more. He lived by this and taught all that this application of the Word was an important piece of being a devoted Christian, like Augustine and him led. Augustine gave far more compassion to the sacraments than Gregory did and this helped balance their dualship. Augustine saw signs as an important piece of his ministry where Gregory had more thoughts on the long term effects of life. This was a way to balance their thinking and have the church deliver a strong punch to the parishioners. Gregory’s sermon on the apocalyptic was a well thought out sermon during these years. Even in Gregory’s time there were worries too great to face and he needed the comfort of a friend to succumb to the fate of the world. Unlike Augustine, Gregory had very little hope of world regeneration. He did most of his sermons on this topic during his friendship with Augustine. He warned his people that they should prepare for the worst and not have any holding on items from the world. He felt more doomed than did Augustine. He dealt with a lot of panic attacks and got comfort

<sup>7</sup> Markus-*Gregory the Great and His World*. 41

from prayer and meditation practices. He named this era an era of action. He felt that the world was past the age of miracles. He ended up falling back into a secular world mind and fought hard for a rejuvenating mind set. He saw the persecution of the church to be hard and full force. He felt that the secular world was rotting the church and he needed reinforcement to make the church stronger. He felt that the church was a privileged area to be a part of and drove hard sermons from the Book of Job to reinforce these theories. He viewed the battle as, 'In the place where the light is to be seen, there the darkness is loved.'<sup>8</sup> He felt these passages should give his followers the capability of turning around and facing the light and stray from the darkness. Like that of a wake up call for their spiritual contemplation and good work. He had compassion for martyrdom and he felt that death brought true life. Some people think Martin Luther was inspired by St. Augustine. Erasmus was another one that studied Paul and Augustines work. It was these points that Erasmus attacked Luther. Even that of a Neoplatonic atmosphere was set in motion by this great Saint. It was tied together through these great Christians.

During the high point of Gregory's life, there were three religions. The pagans felt they were the leading people, these were the Romans. The Jews and Christians stood firm in their beliefs. Of all the Christian men that Gregory admired there was a man that stood the test of time in Gregory's eyes. This was Benedict. He dedicated his whole second book of the *Dialoues* to Benedict. He saw Benedict as a role model for all the monks of the early church. The head of a monastic life was the abbot. To live the monk life, you had to renounce the world and live a life dedicated to God and God alone. Benedict was a religious reformer that was a role model for Pope Gregory. He came up with some rules and regulations to follow as church leaders and this was right up Gregory's ally as to handle the lives of clerical. The Council of Chalcedon laid down some direction for the lives God had called but nothing compared to the life and order of how Benedict worked with the monastic life. Gregory wished to lay down the law for all chastity, poverty, obedience and perseverance and be one community which was laying down laws of those led through Benedict. There were problems lurking with the relations between bishops and monasteries within the diocese. Gregory was tough when it

<sup>8</sup> Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World*. 58- Mor XXV 10.25

came to the bishops being an integral part of the relations of these dioceses. He saw the church as an assemblage of a multitude of individual churches that were represented under each of their own bishops. Gregory knew that the Jews and his Christian people shared the Word of God and a history of faith in an unseen God. This was an issue on his mind. This led him to place the Bishop of Naples in the forefront of helping the Jews find a place among the Christians. Gregory saw the Jews as, “A pearl for ever irritating the oyster.”<sup>9</sup> He was also upset at the thoughts of Jews owning Christian slaves. His concern for justice for the Jews was extremely limited. A large synagogue was moved because of the threat of Christian slaves. He also saw the pagans as a set of God’s people that needed to be led to the feet of God. He saw the world as a place full of priests and nuns, but the harvesters being few and the workload of the Christian world a hard nut to crack. He saw the pagans as idolatrous, witchcraft lovers and people of the dark. Gregory never called himself a political theorist, but he knew that the political arena of his time was in terrible trouble. He had faced issues with the ecumenical patriarch. He saw the patriarch title as a anti-Christian pride that threatened a breach of church peace. This frustrated Gregory and threw him in a whirlwind of anger. This brought forth the remembrance of Charlemagne in which Gregory saw as the father of the church. The Lombards were still an issue and this kept Gregory at bay and he felt the world was coming to an end.

By 593 Gregory saw some relief and knew he could take some time to work with the church and clear up some matters that had surfaced during the dark time of the Lombards. He had to face the destruction of the work of art. Through it all he never pointed his finger at others and challenged his fate. Whatever he faced: natural disasters, plagues, Lombard’s his own troubles at heart or those of the community he always kept a cheerful demeanor and smiled through it all. Pope Gregory the Great had a long life and one of fourteen years of being pope, although he suffered deeply toward the end of his life, he was resilient and tough. He was remembered as a generous donor and friend of the needy. Sadly he left the papal treasury almost bankrupt. He led a large monasticizational movement. His last wish was that his death would be soon and that he would not have to suffer any longer. He is buried in Saint Peter’s Basilica. Where today there is life and activity, just the way he lived. When you see an image of Gregory the Great he is usually dressed in a long pontifical robe and has a dove

9 Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World*. 76

among his midst. In the dove's beak there is a holy pontiff. He was a trained lawyer and a strong force of power and knowledge of how the world works, although he never felt himself a philosopher, he gave his best thoughts to theology and he knew how to give an awe-inspiring sermon.

Gregory the Great was a pope in one of the most difficult times known to man. I too have my secular/religious war and when I heard of the mental anguish that he experienced I knew I wanted to explore his world and see how he overcame the hardships of the two worlds. He was a spectacular man that overcame much adversity and stood tall despite his mental warfare. I enjoyed learning of his family heirloom and how he befriended people over the years to better the church and grow the love of Christ. I highly admire his love for the poor and how his mom and him fed the poor as part of his early adulthood. He was also known to visit the tombs of martyrdoms. His mom instilled habits of sainthood I think are very empowering early on. This taught him the value of life. He loved and suffered equally and learned to live through his grief. He was able to spread the gospel and be a man of authority and grace. I think he was a blessed man and lived a life to be admired and praised.

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