

Talk given at 8:30 AM Mass on Feast of St. Gregory the Great 9/3/14

Our Patron Saint, Pope St. Gregory the Great, was born in the year 540 AD. He was elected, actually acclaimed, by the clergy and the people of Rome as Pope on September 3, 590 AD -- 1,424 years ago today if you're keeping score at home.

St. Gregory the Great is one of the four great teachers in the early centuries of the Catholic Church in the West to be given the title: *Doctor of the Church* -- not M.D. nor Ph.D.--but from the Latin verb "docere ", meaning "to teach ". Hence, *Doctor of the Church* means special, great teacher in the Church. The other three major Western Doctors of the early centuries in Church history are Saints Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome. There would later be other ones, for example, Saints Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Catherine of Siena, and both St. Theresa of Avila and St. Therese of Lisieux, just to name a few. So our St. Gregory is in pretty heady company.

Gregory was born in Rome in 540 AD, son of a quite well-to-do Roman Senator; now, this is not the heyday of the Roman Empire of years gone by with Julius Caesar, Cesar Augustus, and our "friend" Nero --- but Gregory's father was a Senator in the Rome of his time. Gregory's mother is Saint Sylvia. Gregory lived during a time of wars, violence, invasions, famine, destruction.... sounds very much like our time, doesn't it?

In his early 30's this well-to-do and very able young man was made Prefect / kind of like Governor of Rome and its surrounding area. But Gregory himself was very attracted by, and drawn toward, Religious life. Thus, soon after the death of his father, Gregory turned the family home into a monastic Abbey, under the patronage of the apostle St. Andrew.

Gregory became a monk himself -- I presume a Benedictine, as he later wrote a noteworthy book about St. Benedict. Gregory also established six other monasteries on his family estates --- in Sicily. I believe.

In 578 Gregory was sent as the Papal Ambassador to Constantinople in the East. A very different time, but that is similar to where Cardinal Angelo Roncalli would be sent centuries later, before he became Pope St. John XXIII.

In 586 Gregory was back in Rome and was made abbot of St. Andrew's Monastery, where he no doubt would have ben very content to spend the rest of his life in prayer and contemplation. But God had other plans for him. Do you ever feel that you have everything planned and set -- all your ducks in a row, so to speak --only to find that God has other plans for you ! ?

As stated earlier, in the year 590 AD Gregory was called by God through the acclamation of the people and the clergy of Rome, to become the next successor of St. Peter. The title that Pope Gregory himself most preferred was *Servant of the servants of God*.

Pope Gregory established peace with the Lombards, who were ever ready and willing to attack and sack Rome. He worked and ministered assiduously with the poor (much like our own Pope Francis today). As Robert Ellsberg writes in his book All Saints, " (Gregory) brought to the papacy an unusual combination of managerial genius and personal holiness." Ellsberg continues, " With the civil administration of Rome

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in a state of collapse, he assumed de facto authority over Rome and much of Italy, battling against repeated onslaughts of war, famine, and plague. "

I'm not sure exactly what all is true -- perhaps history itself is ambiguous and uncertain about this -- but Pope Gregory certainly was active and influential in matters of Church worship and liturgy. Gregorian chant is named after him, but exactly what he did there is not certain. I would think that as a dedicated and holy monk and Pope he surely was instrumental (pun intended) in this area.

He is renowned as the Apostle to England, though he himself never went there. But he sent St. Augustine of Canterbury and 40 monks to bring the Gospel and the Lord Jesus there.

Gregory wrote many things as Pope, probably the most important of which was the Regula Pastoralis (title in English, The Rule of the Shepherd), which was widely disseminated for centuries afterwards about the Office and Duties of Bishops.

If you haven't done so up to this point, I urge you to read in this week's parish bulletin (week of August 31) the brief explanation there of the mysterious abstract art of the three long narrow windows on the far side of our parish church. I'm like many of you, I'm sure: I like art to be plain and simple, easily understandable to me. But the symbolism of the abstract artistic work does beautifully depict three legends in the life of our marvelous patron who is very appropriately called St. Gregory the Great !

And, as one starts up the side aisle, on the other side of the church, heading towards our daily chapel, there is another stained glass window which recalls the Gregorian themes of education and music represented / symbolized by a harp, a lute, an inkwell, a pen and a book. The large window above the main entrance / exit doors of the church depicts St. Gregory with a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, touching his lips.

I'll end with a quote from the life of St. Gregory written by a contemporary of his named John the Deacon --- no reference to our own Deacon John Isaac or Deacon John DiLissio: " On the first day of every month Pope Gregory distributed to the poor that part of the Church's revenue which was paid in kind. Corn, wine, cheese, vegetables, bacon, meat, fish and oil were individually doled out...by this head of the Lord's family. (Moreover), every day he sent out through the streets and lanes of all the city districts duly appointed messengers with cooked provisions for the sick and infirm. To those of more delicate sensibilities, he used to send a dish from his own table, before he himself began to eat, to be delivered at their doors as a blessing from the Apostle (Peter)...no one was excluded from the kindness of this most compassionate of providers. "

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