

# history of our patron saint

Pope St. Gregory the Great is one of the two men to whom history has accorded the triple honor of Pope, Saint and Great. Pope St. Leo the Great alone shares this tribute with him.

Gregory was born at Rome about the year 540. His father, Gordianus, was a wealthy Roman senator. After the birth of Gregory, his mother, Sylvia, consecrated herself to God in a little oratory near St. Paul's. He rose to the highest political position in Rome when he was made Prefect of the City in 573. One year later he abandoned everything this world had to offer and became a monk. Four years later, he was ordained to the priesthood.

As a youth, he applied himself to philosophy. Having discharged the pretorian office, he built six monasteries in Sicily, and a seventh, under the title of St. Andrew, in his own house in Rome, where with his teachers Hilarion and Maximian, he embraced the monastic life. Shortly afterwards, he was created cardinal deacon and was sent to Constantinople as legate from Pope Pelagius to the Emperor Tiberius Constantine. Before the emperor he achieved such a memorable victory over the patriarch Eutychius who had written against the real and physical resurrection of the body that the prince threw his book into the fire. Not long after Eutychius became sick and at the approach of death, he took hold of the skin of his hand, and said in the presence of many persons: *"I acknowledge that we shall rise in this flesh."*

Gregory returned to Rome after Pelagius had been carried off by the plague and was unanimously elected sovereign Pontiff in 590, thus becoming the first of the thirty three Sons of St. Benedict to fill that exalted office. He refused the honor as long as possible by disguising himself and hiding in a cave, but he was discovered by the sign of a pillar of fire and was consecrated at St. Peter's.

As a Benedictine, Gregory yearned to engage in missionary work. Before his advancement to the papacy he met a number of slaves for sale in the Roman market. They were handsome youths and Gregory inquired whence they came. Upon learning that they had been bought in Britian, he sighed



and declared it lamentable *"that the prince of darkness should be master of so much beauty . . . . . and that so fine an exterior should have nothing of God's grace to furnish it within."* He said, *"you are Angles, and Angels too. I will bring the Gospel to you."* Gregory at once applied to the Pope and obtained permission to go in person to Britain. He had already started on the journey when Pope Benedict I, at the insistence of the Roman populace, was persuaded to dispatch messengers recalling Gregory to Rome. They caught up with him on the third day and Gregory obediently returned with them to the Holy City. Gregory, however, never forgot the Angles. Later on as Pope, he sent the Abbot Augustine with forty monks to England to bring the gift of the gospel to them. What he as a monk was not allowed to do, he as Pope commanded to be done. St. Augustine has ever since been considered the Patron Saint of England.

As Pontiff, Gregory left many examples of learning and holiness to his successors. His love and labors for the poor were constant and efficient. He had lists of their names and often had them dine with him at his own table. Every month he superintended a distribution of supplies among his poor. One day a beggar was found dead on a bystreet of the city and Gregory condemned himself for his neglect, although he was not to blame, and abstained a number of days from celebrating the divine mysteries. He re-established the Catholic faith in several places where it had become weak. He put down the Donatists in Africa, the Arians in Spain, and drove the Agnoetae out of Alexandria. He refused to give the pallium to Syagrius, Bishop of Autun, unless he would expel the neophyte heretics from Gaul. He induced the Goths to abandon the Arian heresy.

He checked the haughty pretensions of John, Patriarch of Constantinople, who gave himself the title of aecumenical bishop of the Church. He persuaded the Emperor Maurice to revoke the decree which forbade soldiers to become monks.

He enriched the Church with most holy practices and laws. At St. Peter's, he passed several decrees, among them; that in the Mass, the Kyrie

Eleison should be said nine times; that the Alleluja should be said, except between Septuagesima and Easter; that there should be inserted in the Canon, *"And mayst Thou dispose our days in Thy peace."* He augmented the Litanies, the Stations and the Ecclesiastical Office. He wished that the four Councils, Nice, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, be honored like the four Gospels. He allowed the Bishops of Sicily, who, according to the ancient custom of their churches used to visit Rome every three years, to make that visit every fifth year. Peter the Deacon assures us that he frequently saw the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove resting on the hand of the Pontiff while he was dictating. It is a matter of wonder, that with his incessant sickness and ill health he could have said, done, written, and decreed, as he did.

To this day, the official chant of the Church is called the Gregorian Chant. It was he who revised and regulated liturgical worship and the administration of the Sacraments. His leadership brought peace to a Rome long distraught with war and organized the temporalities of the Church on an enduring basis. He was a prolific writer on scriptural and spiritual subjects and his books were for centuries the textbooks of Christendom.

It was he who first began to subscribe all his official letters as *The Servant of the Servants of God*. This practice has been continued to the present day. He is now honored also with the title of Doctor of the Church.

At length, after performing many miracles, he was called to his reward in heaven, after being Pope from 590 to 604. His body is buried in the Basilica of St. Peter near the Secretarium. His entire life can be summed up in the words of the Antiphon in Laud for his feast day, *"Well done, thou good and faithful servant, because thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will place thee over many things, saith the Lord."* His feast day, at first celebrated on March 12, was changed to September 3rd.