

46// OF ST. GREGORY THE POPE

St. Gregory was born of the parentage of senators of Rome, whose father was named Gordian and his mother Silvia. And when he had so much learned that he was a master in philosophy, and also was rich of patrimony, he thought that he would leave all the riches that he had, and would enter into religion for to serve God. But in this, that he put this thought in respite, he conceived another purpose, that was that him seemed he should better serve God in a secular habit, in doing the office of the pretoria of the provost of Rome, for to give to each man duly reason after the nght of his cause. But he found in this office so great secular business that it began to displeas him, because by this great business he withdrew him over far from God.

ST. GREGORY ENTERS THE MONASTIC LIFE

In this meanwhile his father and mother died, in such wise that he was rich of patrimony and puissant, that at the beginning he founded and endowed with rents six abbeys in Sicily, and the seventh he founded within the walls of Rome in the honour of St. Andrew the apostle, in the which he became a monk, and the remnant of his patrimony he gave for God's sake so that he that tofore went clothed in clothes of gold and of silk, and adorned with precious stones in the city, when he was monk served in a poor habit the monks.

There was at the beginning of his conversation of so perfect a life that it might be said well that he was all perfect. He made great abstinences in eating, in drinking, in waking, and in praying, in so much that he was so travailed that unnethe he might sustain himself. He had put out of his heart all secular things so that his conversation was in heaven, for he had addressed all his desire for to come to the joy permanable.

Gregory is said of grex, which is to say a flock; and of gore, which is to say a preacher. Then Gregory is to say as a preacher to an assembly or flock of people. Or it is said as a noble doctor or preacher. Or Gregory is to say in our language as awaked, for he awoke to himself, to God, and to the people, he awoke to himself by keeping of cleanness, to God by good contemplation, and to the people by continual predication. And by this is deserved the vision of God; and St. Austin saith, in the Book of Order, that he seeth God that well liveth, well studieth, and well prayeth. And Paul, the historiographer of the Lombards, writeth his history and life of him, the which John the deacon afterwards much diligently compiled and ordained.

The Angel and the Silver Dish

On a time it happed that, St. Gregory in his cell of the same abbey whereas he was abbot wrote something, and an angel appeared to him in semblance of a mariner, which seemed as he had escaped from the tempest of the sea, and prayed him weeping to have pity on him. Then St. Gregory commanded that there should be given to him six pence, and then he departed.

The same day the angel came again in like wise as he did tofore, and said that he had lost all his good, and prayed him that he would yet help him; on whom St. Gregory had yet pity, and did to be given to him six pence more, yet at the third time he came and made great cry and wept, and prayed him that he would yet help him toward his great loss, so that St. Gregory commanded his provost that he should yet give to this poor man an alms.

And the provost said that there was no more silver in all the abbey, but a dish of silver in which his mother was wont to send him pottage. And St. Gregory commanded anon that that dish of silver should be given to him and the angel took it with great joy. And little while after, this angel appeared to St. Gregory and said to him that God hath sent him so to him.

THE MISSION TO ENGLAND

It happed afterward that as St. Gregory passed through the market of Rome, and saw there two fair children white and ruddy of visage, and fair yellow hair which were for to sell. And St. Gregory demanded from whence they were, and the merchant answered, of England. After St. Gregory demanded if they were Christian, and he answered: Nay, but that they were paynims. Then sighed St. Gregory and said: Alas, what fair people hath the devil in his doctrine and in his domination.

After he demanded how these people were called: he answered that they were called Angles men; then he said they may well be so called for they have the visage of angels.

And for that St. Gregory went to the pope, and by great prayers he impetred [beseeched] and had grant that he was sent in to England for to convert the people of that same country, but when the Romans heard say that Gregory was sent into England, anon they went to the pope and said to him: Thou hast angered St. Peter, thou hast destroyed all Rome, and hurt all holy church in this that thou hast let Gregory go out of Rome.

Of which word the pope was angry and much abashed, and sent anon his messengers after St. Gregory, and commanded him to return and come again to Rome, which then was gone on his journey three days, and for his noble and good renomee the pope made him cardinal deacon.

HIS REIGN AS POPE

He Tries to Refuse the Papacy

After, for the corruption of the air, the pope Pelagius died, and then St. Gregory was elect of all the people to be pope, but he refused it and said that to that dignity he was not worthy, and for the right great mortality, ere that he was sacred [consecrated] pope he made to the people a sermon and said:

Right dear brethren, well ought we to have doubt of the scourge of God ere that we feel it, and yet we ought to fear it, and to turn and forsake our sins, lo! ye may behold the people die ere they bewEEP their sins; think ye then in what point he

cometh in the presence of the judge that hath had no time to bewail his sins. The houses be void, the children die in the presence of father and mother, suddenly, so that they have little time to die, wherefore every man amend his life while he hath time for to repent him of his evil deeds and sins, ere that the judge call him from the mortal body. He saith by the prophet, I will not the death of a sinner, but I will that he return and live; much soon the judge heareth the sinner when he converteth from his sins and amendeth his life.

By such manner admonested he to the people their health, and he ordained to make procession in all the churches much solemnly for to impetrate [beg] and get mercy for this mortality [i.e., the plague].

When the procession was done he would have gone privily out of Rome, for to eschew the office of the papalty, but against that the gates were kept so that he might not issue. At the last he did do change his habit, and so much did with the merchants that they brought him out of Rome in a tun upon a cart. And when he was far out of the town, he issued out of the tun and hid him in a ditch.

And when he had been therein three days the people of Rome sought him all about. Anon they saw a pillar shining descend from heaven straight upon the ditch in which St. Gregory was; and a recluse, a holy man saw that by that pillar angels descended from heaven to St. Gregory and after went up again. Anon then St. Gregory was taken of the people and after the ordinance of holy church he was ordained and sacred pope against his will, for he was much debonair, humble and merciful to rich and poor, and to great and small.

His Humility

Well may he apperceive that readeth his writings how oft he complained of this great charge that he was charged withal, to which he said he was not worthy thereto, and also he might not hear that any should praise him, ne in letters ne in words. And alway he was in great humility and accounted himself more meek and low after that he was pope than tofore, insomuch that he was the first of the popes that wrote: *Servus servorum Dei*, that is, servant of the servants of God.

His Vigor

He had great cure and was busy to convert sinners. He made and compiled many fair books, of which the church is greatly illumined. He was never idle, how well that he was always sick. He converted the English people to the Christian faith by three holy men and good clerks that he sent thither, that is to wit Augustin, Mellitus, and John, for to preach the faith.

The Plague Ends

And because the mortality ceased not, he ordained a procession, in the which he did do bear an image of our Lady, which, as is said, St. Luke the Evangelist made, which was a good painter, he had carved it and painted after the likeness of the glorious Virgin Mary.

And anon the mortality ceased, and the air became pure and clear, and about the image was heard a voice of angels that sung this anthem: *Regina cæli lætare*, etc., and St. Gregory put thereto: *Ora pro nobis, deum rogamus, alleluia*. At the same time St. Gregory saw an angel upon a castle which made clean a sword all bloody, and put it into the sheath, and thereby St. Gregory understood that the pestilence of this mortality was passed, and after that it was called the Castle Angel.

His Generosity

St. Gregory did every day so great alms that many in the country about were nourished by him, whom he had by name written, and also the monks that dwelt in the Mount Sinai had of him their sustenance. Among all other alms that he did he governed three thousand virgins, to whom he sent every year four score pound of gold, and also he founded to them an abbey in Jerusalem, and sent to them that therein were such things as they lacked. Every day had he poor men to dinner.

The Lord Appears to Him as a Pilgrim

On a time it happed that he took the laver for to give water to a pilgrim for to wash his hands by great humility, and anon the pilgrim vanished away, whereof St. Gregory had marvel. The night after our Lord appeared in a vision and said to him: The other days thou hast received me in my members, but yesterday thou receivedst me in my person.

The Angel of the Silver Dish Returns

Another day St. Gregory commanded to his dispenser that he should bring to dinner twelve poor men, and when St. Gregory and the poor men were set at meat, he told at the table sitting thirteen poor pilgrims, and demanded of his dispenser why he had done above his commandment to bring in more than twelve persons. And anon the dispenser, all abashed, went and told the poor men, and found but twelve, and said to St. Gregory: Holy father, there be no more but twelve, and so many shall ye find and no more.

Then considered St. Gregory that, one of the pilgrims that sat next to him oft changed his visage, for oft he seemed young, and after old. And after dinner St. Gregory took him by the hand and brought him into his chamber, and prayed him that he would tell him his name. And he answered: Wherefore demandest thou my name, which is marvellous? Nevertheless know thou well that I am the same poor mariner to whom thou gavest the dish of silver in which thy mother was wont to send the pottage, and know for certain that sith that day that thou didst to me that alms, God hath destined thee to be pope. And said moreover: I am the angel of God, and he hath sent me hither to thee to be thy defender and procurer of that which thou wouldst demand and impetre of him, and after this the angel vanished away.

The Hermit with the Cat

And in that time there was an hermit, an holy man, which had left and forsaken all the goods of the world for God's sake, and had retained nothing but a cat, with which he played oft, and held

it in his lap deliciously. On a day it happened that he prayed God devoutly that he would vouchsafe to show to him to what saint he should be in like joy in heaven, because for his love he had left all the world and renounced.

Upon this God showed him in a vision that St. Gregory and he should have like joy in heaven. And when he understood this he sighed sore and praised little his poverty, which he had long suffered and borne, if he should have like merit which abounded so greatly in secular riches.

Upon this there came a voice to him which said that: The possession of riches maketh not a man in this world rich, but the ardour of covetise. Then be still thou, darest thou compare thy poverty to the riches of St. Gregory which lovest more thy cat, with whom thou ceasest not to stroke and play, than St. Gregory doth all his riches, for he ceaseth never to give alms for God's sake?

Then the hermit thanked Almighty God, and prayed that he might have his merit and reward with St. Gregory in the glory of paradise.

The Angel at St. Mary Major

On a day it happened that St. Gregory sang mass in the church of St. Mary Major, and when he had said: *Pax domini sit semper vobiscum*, anon the angel said: *Et cum spiritu tuo*, and from then forthon the pope ordained a station in that church every year on Easter day, and when then he said in his mass: *Pax domini, etc.*, none shall answer, in remembrance of this miracle.

He Intercedes for the Emperor Trajan

In the time that Trajan the emperor reigned, and on a time as he went toward a battle out of Rome, it happened that in his way as he should ride, a woman, a widow, came to him weeping and said: I pray thee, sire, that thou avenge the death of one my son which innocently and without cause hath been slain.

The emperor answered: If I come again from the battle whole and sound then I shall do justice for the death of thy son.

Then said the widow: Sire, and if thou die in the battle who shall then avenge his death?

And the emperor said: He that shall come after me.

And the widow said: Is it not better that thou do to me justice and have the merit thereof of God than another have it for thee?

Then had Trajan pity and descended from his horse and did justice in avenging the death of her son.

On a time St. Gregory went by the market of Rome which is called the market of Trajan, and then he remembered of the justice and other good deeds of Trajan, and how he had been

piteous and debonair, and was much sorrowful that he had been a paynim, and he turned to the church of St. Peter wailing for the horror of the miscreance of Trajan.

Then answered a voice from God saying: I have now heard thy prayer, and have spared Trajan from the pain perpetual.

By this, as some say, the pain perpetual due to Trajan as a miscreant was somedeal taken away, but for all that was not he quit from the prison of hell, for the soul may well be in hell and feel there no pain by the mercy of God.

His Illnesses

And after, it is said that the angel in his answer said more to thus: Because thou hast prayed for a paynim, God granteth thee to choose of two things, that one which thou wilt, or thou shalt be two days in purgatory in pain, or else all the days of thy life thou shalt languish in sickness.

Then answered St. Gregory that he had liefer to have sickness all his life in this world, than to feel by two days the pains of purgatory.

And ever after he had continually the fevers, or axes, or the gout in his feet, and hereof himself maketh mention in one his epistle, and saith: I am so much tormented of the gout in my feet, and of other sicknesses that, my life is to me a great pain, every day meseemeth that I ought to die, and always I abide the death. Some time my pain is little, and some time right great, but it is not so little that it departeth from me, ne so great that it bringeth me to death, and thus it is that I, that am always ready to die, am withdrawn from death.

A Eucharistic Miracle

It happed that a widow that was wont every Sunday to bring hosts to sing mass with, should on a time be houseled and communed, and when St. Gregory should give to her the holy sacrament in saying: *Corpus domini nostri, etc.*, that is to say: The body of our Lord Jesu Christ keep thee into everlasting life, anon this woman began to smile tofore St. Gregory, and anon he withdrew his hand, and remised the sacrament upon the altar. And he demanded her, tofore the people, why she smiled, and she said: Because that the bread that I have made with my proper hands thou namest it the body of our Lord Jesu Christ.

Anon St. Gregory put himself to prayer with the people, for to pray to God that hereupon he would show his grace for to confirm our belief, and when they were risen from prayer, St. Gregory saw the holy sacrament in figure of a piece of flesh as great as the little finger of an hand, and anon after, by the prayers of St. Gregory, the flesh of the sacrament turned into semblance of bread as it had been tofore, and therewith he communed and houseled the woman, which after was more religious, and the people more firm in the faith.

St. Gregory's Musical Reforms

St. Gregory made and ordained the song of the office of holy church, and established at Rome two schools of song, that one beside the church of St. Peter, and that other by the church of St. John Lateran, where the place is yet, where he lay and taught the scholars, and the rod with which he menaced them, and the antiphoner on which he learned them is yet there. He put to the canon of the mass these words: *Diesque nostros in tua pace disponas, atque ab æterna damnatione nos eripi, et in electorum tuorum jubeas grege numerari.* ["Arrange our days in thy peace, save us from eternal damnation, and ordain that we may be numbered in the flock of thine elect."]

At the last when St. Gregory had been pope thirteen years, six months and ten days, he being full of good works, departed out of this world in the year of our Lord six hundred and six years, in the time when Phocas was emperor of Rome. Let us then pray to St. Gregory that he get us grace that we may amend so ourselves here in this life that we may come unto everlasting life in heaven. Amen.

The [iconography of St. Gregory](#) is available at the [Christian iconography website](#).

For other saints, see the [index to this Golden Legend website](#).

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