

Homily for Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome, 461

November 10, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 25: Philippians 1:1–11; Psalm 111; Luke 14:1–6

Michael Walsh is an English Roman Catholic author, historian, and an archivist at London University. He was formerly a Jesuit. Some years ago, I picked up his book *The Conclave: A Sometimes Secret and Occasionally Bloody History of Papal Elections*. He starts with some straightforward historical facts. He writes, “ ‘Pope’ simply means ‘father’ . . . it comes from the Greek ‘papas’. In the Western . . . Church it was used of bishops from the third century onward . . . from the eighth century onward the Bishop of Rome began to use it of themselves in official documents, and in the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII demanded that in the West the term should be applied only to Bishops of Rome, and to no one else.¹

Today we commemorate the life of Leo the Great. That said, Leo I and Gregory I are the only two popes accorded by history the title of “the Great.” Leo was a deacon in Rome when he was elected bishop after the death of Sixtus III in August 440. Leo was consecrated

¹ Michael Walsh, *The Conclave: A Sometimes Secret and Occasionally Bloody History of Papal Elections* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 1–2.

bishop on September 29, 440. He died on today's date, the tenth of November, in the year 461. His biographical sketch in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* is helpful. It begins, "When Leo was born, about the year 400, the Western Roman Empire was almost in shambles." In the year 410, the Visigoths sacked Rome. He would be bishop in 452 when the Huns approached Rome. Leo negotiated with Attila. An annual tribute persuaded Attila to withdraw from Italy. Three years later the Vandals arrived. The city was pillaged, but Leo successfully asked that the city not be burned and its inhabitants killed.

Leo is a significant theologian for a letter he wrote to the bishop of Constantinople on the thirteenth of June in the year 449 that helped shape the "Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ" at the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451.² This language is reflected in our creeds.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church tells us that "143 genuine letters and 96 sermons [of Leo] have survived."³ I'm intrigued by the entry's remark that the sermons "cover the whole [church] year; they

² *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 864.

³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Leo I, St.," 811.

provide important evidence of contemporary liturgical practices . . . and reveal a remarkable grasp of principles.”⁴ I’m not sure when I will have time to read some of these sermons, but I’m intrigued to wonder what I might learn.

Now, the papacy part. Leo is not yet the only pope in the Christian West. But as bishop of Rome, and Rome still being a surviving city in the fifth century, Christians in the West would continue for centuries to look to the Christians of Rome for guidance. Diarmaid MacCulloch, in his book *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, writes of Christians in the seventh to ninth centuries converting the remaining pagans in the West, “Christians everywhere had a big advantage in being associated with the ancient power that obsessed all Europe: imperial Rome . . . the memory of the empire stood for wealth, wine, central heating and filing systems, and its two languages, Latin and Greek, could link Armagh”—in Ireland—“to Alexandria”⁵—in Egypt.

Back to Walsh’s book, *The Conclave*. He writes, “There is no irrefutable proof that Peter was ever in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 343.

Rome, but there are few nowadays who would deny it.”⁶ Count me among the few. One can understand why, with the collapse of civilization in the West, Leo grasped the opportunity as bishop of Rome to assert new meaning to Jesus’ words about Peter in Matthew’s gospel—and only in Matthew’s gospel. But my understanding of the gospel and Christian community does not include an autocratic leader or an intellectually dishonest approach to history.

There’s a statue of Peter in Saint Peter’s Basilica. On the feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, the figure is dressed in cope and papal tiara. No. Not for me. At Leo’s tomb in Saint Peter’s, Leo is in the regalia of the renaissance papacy. But I think in life, he was probably wearing something like a conical chasuble.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁶ Walsh, 3.