



Plague in Rome 591

Plague in Rome ends after Pope St. Gregory the Great leads a procession with a painting of Our Lady by St. Luke (591)

The Abbot Orsini wrote: "On this day, in the year 591, St. Gregory the Great, having had the picture of Our Lady, which was painted by St. Luke, carried in procession, the plague ceased at Rome."

The miseries that afflicted Rome in the year 591 were substantial. The Gothic War between the Byzantine Empire and the Goths had substantially depopulated Italy, so much so that a Germanic tribe of Lombards had entered the peninsula and established their own kingdom. They were pagans and Arians who did not respect Catholics, burning the famous Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino and pillaging the land at will.

The instability and warfare caused famine in large regions, though Rome was still able to obtain grain by sea. Then came earthquakes and flooding to further the suffering, and from this plague Rome was not immune. The banks of the Tiber overflowed, and when the waters did not recede, all of the low-lying lands became swamps that brought death and plague. The

disease struck with such rapidity that the victim would often die shortly after realizing he had contracted the disease, although there were some who sickened but recovered. Our custom of saying, "God Bless you," to someone who sneezes came about at this time, for sneezing was one of the signs that someone had contracted the disease

Even the Roman Pontiff died of the plague on February 7th, 590. His successor was Pope Saint Gregory the Great, who was both a humble and pious man. It would be an understatement to say he did not want the honor of being the next pope, but he did do everything in his power to try to save his people. He understood that the plague was a chastisement from God, and encouraged the faithful to repent of their sins and pray for deliverance while he and the religious cared for the people of Rome.

Finally, Saint Gregory called for a procession to take place at dawn on April 25th. On that day the faithful first assembled in their groups throughout Rome and then walked through the streets of the city praying and singing as they approached the church of Saint Mary Major. The plague was so potent at that time that eighty people collapsed and died as they walked toward the meeting place. Pope Saint Gregory met them upon their arrival, joining them in prayer as he took his place with them holding aloft the miraculous image of Our Lady painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist. As the procession neared the Vatican the participants all saw Saint Michael the archangel standing upon the cupola of Hadrian's mausoleum as he sheathed his flaming sword. It was a sign that the chastisement had come to an end, and at once the heaviness in the air abated and the air itself seemed to freshen and clear. Indeed, at that moment the plague ended as the faithful rejoiced and lifted up their voices to thank the Mother of God.

"Regina Coeli laetare, Alleluia! (Queen of heaven, rejoice, Alleluia!)

Quia quem meruisti portare, Alleluia! (Son whom you merited to bear, Alleluia!) Resurrexit sicut dixit, Alleluia! (He has risen as He said, Alleluia!)

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