

Well educated and well connected, Gregory had a promising career as a civil servant. Before the age of 30, he was the chief civil administrator of the city of Rome. Just as God called Peter and the other apostles to be fishers of men, Gregory felt a strong call from God to leave everything behind and to follow Jesus. He left public service to dedicate his life to God. Despite having a vast wealth, he was willing to give everything up for God. “His Sicilian estates were given up to found six monasteries there, and his home on the Caelian Hill was converted into another under the patronage of Saint Andrew.”ⁱ

From 574 to 577, he devoted himself to a life of prayer as a Benedictine monk. He lived a very austere life and considered this period the happiest time of his life. Familiar with his political and administrative skills, Pope Benedict I, asked him to serve as one of the seven deacons of Rome. He was soon sent to Constantinople as a papal ambassador to the Church in the East. As best as possible, he maintained a monastic lifestyle in order to stay close to God and avoid being swept up in political intrigue. He returned home in 586, under Pope Pelagius II and was able to resume his monastic life of prayer for a short while. In the monastery he dedicated himself to teaching about the Holy Scriptures. In Rome, Pope Pelagius relied on him as a trusted adviser. On the death of the Pope in 590, many wanted Gregory to become the new pope.

In the six months between the death of one pope and the ratification of a new pope by the emperor, Rome suffered from a devastating plague. Gregory rallied the people to pray for the end of the plague with “a vast sevenfold procession which was to start from each of the seven regions of the city and meet at the Basilica of the Blessed Virgin, all praying the while for pardon and the withdrawal of the pestilence. This was accordingly done, and the memory of the event is ... that the Archangel St. Michael was seen ... sheathing his sword as a sign that the plague was over.”ⁱⁱ

Gregory reluctantly became pope when officially chosen. One is reminded of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42). Leaving the tranquility of monastic life once again, Gregory trusted in God to show him the way. Gregory had the God given gifts to identify necessary reforms and to implement them at a time when the church needed his unique gifts and talents:

He removed unworthy priests from office, forbade taking money for many services, emptied the papal treasury to ransom prisoners ... and to care for persecuted Jews and the victims of plague and famine. He was very concerned about the conversion of England, sending 40 monks from his own monastery. He is known for his reform of the liturgy, and for strengthening respect for doctrine.ⁱⁱⁱ

When we celebrate Holy Thursday’s Mass of the Lord’s Supper, the priest reads from the Gospel of John of how Jesus washed the feet of the apostles. Jesus tells Peter, “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). Pope Gregory saw himself as the “servant of the servants of God.” He would also easily identify with Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of Luke, “let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant” (22:26).^{iv}

History and the church have looked quite favorably on his service. The humble pope is known today as Gregory the Great and is hailed as a doctor of the church for “summing up the teaching of the earlier Fathers and consolidating it into a harmonious whole.”^v He was seriously ill for many of his 14 years as pope, finally dying in 604. He relied all the more on God to show him the way to live with suffering and allow it to be transforming for the good of the church.

ⁱ ewtn.com/catholicism/saints/gregory-the-great-596

ⁱⁱ ewtn.com/catholicism/saints/gregory-the-great-596

ⁱⁱⁱ franciscanmedia.org/saint-gregory-the-great/

^{iv} catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-gregory-the-great-583

^v ewtn.com/catholicism/saints/gregory-the-great-596