

Today we celebrate the memorial of Pope Leo the Great who died in 461 after serving as Pope for a 21-year reign that was fraught with many difficulties. Leo was a strong and capable leader who guided the church through numerous heresies and threats of destruction. The western Church was troubled by Pelagianism which denied Original Sin and Manichaeism which held that matter is evil. “In this same period, many Eastern Christians had begun arguing about the relationship between Jesus’ humanity and divinity.”<sup>i</sup>

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13). The church was grappling with this question as some proposed that Jesus only had a divine nature and wasn’t truly human. A priest named Eutyches, falsely believed that Jesus was the Word made flesh with only one nature. Pope Leo the Great helped to settle the matter by reaffirming the faith and explaining Jesus was fully human and was fully divine. Jesus is one person with two natures. Jesus in his human nature truly died. Jesus in his divine nature was incapable of death.

Pope Leo’s written explanation in 449 cites the Nicene Creed as a simple proof. Eutyches “should have listened carefully and accepted the common and undivided creed by which the whole body of the faithful confess that they believe in God the Father almighty and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the holy Spirit and the virgin Mary.”<sup>ii</sup> The Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon agreed with Pope Leo in 451. To further explain using the words of Pope Leo:

Without leaving his Father’s glory behind, the Son of God comes down from his heavenly throne and enters the depths of our world. While remaining pre-existent, he begins to exist in time. The Lord of the universe veiled his measureless majesty and took on a servant’s form. The God who knew no suffering did not despise becoming a suffering man, and, deathless as he is, to be subject to the laws of death.<sup>iii</sup>

In addition to his involvement at the Council of Chalcedon, Pope Leo is also well known for saving Rome from destruction in 452. Atilla the Hun was on the warpath and headed for Rome. He had already waged a successful campaign against the northeastern regions of what is modern day Italy. Pope Leo and a Roman delegation went to Atilla and asked for Rome to be spared. Atilla accepted the peaceful delegation and spared Rome as well as the rest of the peninsula.

Three years later, Geneseric’s Vandals picked up where Atilla the Hun left off. An unarmed Pope surrounded by clergy argued for peace once again. Although the Vandals plundered the city for two weeks, the pope’s efforts prevented Rome from being burned and assured that the Basilicas of St Peter, St Paul and St John were spared.<sup>iv</sup> Safe from the threat of destruction, many sought refuge and safety within the churches.

While external threats were serious to the survival of the church, as pastor, Pope Leo was concerned for his flock and the internal threats they faced from vice and sin. He counseled, “We cannot otherwise prevail against our adversaries, unless we prevail against our own selves,” We must turn our minds to God for the strength to resist the temptations of earthly pleasures. Fasting and prayer and almsgiving are powerful disciplines to help us turn to God and away from sin. “Christian people, whatever the amount of their abstinence, should rather desire to satisfy themselves with the Word of God than with bodily food.”<sup>v</sup>

Pope Leo called his flock to holiness by encouraging them to care for the poor and the sick. Christ is merciful to us. “Let us not pass over the groans of the poor with deaf ear, but with prompt kindness bestow our mercy on the needy, that we may deserve to find mercy in the judgment.” Each person has the capacity and the responsibility to help others. “Let our humaneness be felt by the sick in their illnesses, by the weakly in their infirmities, by the exiles in their hardships, by the orphans in their destitution, and by solitary widows in their sadness.”<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/saint/pope-st-leo-the-great-651

<sup>ii</sup> ewtn.com/catholicism/teachings/tome-of-leo-237

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_aud\_20080305.html

<sup>v</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/news/lenten-fasting-advice-from-the-pope-who-faced-attila-the-hun-42219

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.