



From Deacon Mark Miller's Desk

The church celebrates two notable feasts this week: Saint Gregory the Great [3 Sep] and the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary [8 Sep]. St Gregory is one of the four Latin Fathers of the church [the others are Saints Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose].

Gregory was born in 540 in Rome. His father was a wealthy landowner and member of the Roman Senate. His father's position ensured Gregory received an excellent education. He followed his family's tradition of service. While still a young man, he was first a Roman Senator and then a perfect [administrator] of Rome. His final position was Chief Magistrate of Rome. He served in these positions until he turned 34 in 574.

Gregory had long wanted to dedicate his life to God as a monk and with his public duty to serve completed, he established a monastery in his family home. Life as a monk was not part of God's plan for Gregory. The pope made Gregory a deacon in 579 and sent him on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople. He returned to Rome and his monastery in 585. In 590, when Pope Pelagius II died from the plague, Gregory was – against his wishes – elected Pope. At the age of 50, installed as Pope Gregory I. The new pope faced turbulent times.

The Roman empire was in steep decline, and two warring factions [the Lombards and the Byzantines] were disrupting the lives of the people of Italy. In Rome, Gregory paid the city's daily operating expenses while also paying a daily ransom to hold back the swords of the invading forces. He conducted military actions through planning strategies, funding soldiers, and directing diplomatic efforts. Twice he prevented the fall of Rome. He also ransomed hostages, supported refugees, secured the vital grain supply, and repaired the life-giving aqueducts.

Gregory's experience as an administrator served him and the church well. He was in contact with all the churches in Christendom. He removed unworthy priests from office. He used the papal treasury to care for persecuted Jews as well as victims of plague and famine. He sent 40 monks from his own monastery to England after seeing orphans from that country sold as slaves in Rome. He stopped priests and bishops from

receiving payment for offering church services. His book, *Pastoral Care*, on the duties and qualities of a bishop, was read for centuries after his death.

Gregory was a great reformer of liturgy. Gregorian Chant may be his most well-known contribution, but several other of his prayers are still included in the Mass. The Our Father's place in the liturgy today began with an initiative by Gregory. St. Gregory the Great died in 604.

Each 8 Dec, the church – East and West – celebrates the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Scripture doesn't mention Mary's birth of course; the information we do have primarily comes from a second century document entitled the *Protoevangelium of James*. In it we learn that Mary's father, Saint Joachim was a wealthy member of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. He and his wife, Saint Anne, pray and fast asking God for a child. Anne was visited by an angel who revealed that "The Lord has heard your prayer, and you shall conceive, and shall bring forth, and your seed shall be spoken of in all the world."

The Protoevangelium does not set a specific date for Mary's birthday. The Byzantine church was the first to set the 8 Sep date in the early seventh century; the Latin church didn't adopt that date till nearly 100 years later.

Scholars at the University of Dayton explain that "The earliest document commemorating this feast comes from the sixth century. It is generally believed that this feast originated in Jerusalem since there is evidence, in the fifth century, of a church dedicated to St. Anne, located north of the Temple in the neighborhood of the Pool of Bethesda. Sofronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, affirmed in the year 603 that this was the location of Mary's birth. After the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary increased significantly. This, combined with the influence of the Apocrypha, may have been a factor in the increase of popular devotion of the people toward Mary." The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary was later fixed at December 8, nine months prior to her birth.