

Pope St. Leo: Earning the Great

Odysseus, Aeneas, and Achilles are the names of great heroes, mighty warriors whose acts have lived on beyond their time. They have been immortalized in poem and story, and they are still remembered to this day, despite living thousands of years ago. One, who was even greater than any of these mythic heroes, was known for his skill in diplomacy, instead of in war. Incredibly, as an old man, he managed to turn back an entire army without striking a single blow. The many amazing things he achieved earned him the title of Pope St. Leo “the Great”. His refutation of heresy and his defense of the faith provide a fantastic example of what Christians should aspire to do, and he had a profound influence on the events of his time.

There is almost no knowledge about Pope Leo’s early years. The only information historians have found is that his family was probably from Tuscany.¹ Detailed information about him only starts after he became a deacon in 431 AD, working under Pope Celestine I. Even at this early stage of his vocation, St. Leo had a considerable influence on those around him. St. John Cassian dedicated his work *De Incarnatione Domini contra Nestorium* to St. Leo, who had encouraged him to write it. The integrity of St. Leo was well known. Emperor Valentinian III sent the then-deacon to settle a dispute between the magistrate and the chief military commander of Gaul, modern day France. This job was a huge responsibility, and it shows just how much St. Leo’s superiors trusted him to get the job done. These examples show that St. Leo was very influential, even before he became pope.

For these reasons, it was well received when he was chosen as the successor to Pope Sixtus III, who had died while Leo was in Gaul. Upon returning to Rome, Leo was elected to be the Vicar of Christ on September 29, 440, and he began his 21-year journey to sustain the fragile unity of the Church. This fragility was due in part to the threat of invasion. There were also many heresies at the time: Pelagianism, which held that humans did not need divine grace to merit Heaven²; Manichaeism, founded on the idea

that there were two forces of light and darkness battling for supremacy³; and Priscillianism, whose secret societies of followers believed in Manichaeism⁴. In dealing with all of these problems, the new pope's strength of character was soon put to the test.

At this time, Barbarian tribes were the greatest threat to the civilized world. One of the worst tribes were the Huns, led by the brutal Attila the Hun. This cruel, barbaric leader was infamous across Christendom. Under him, the Huns led daring raids into the Eastern edge of the Roman empire, but it wasn't until 452, when they invaded the heart of the Roman empire, in Italy, that Rome realized the danger posed by the Huns⁵. The Huns had charged into Italy virtually unopposed, and it was all the Romans could do to slow them down with hit-and-run tactics in the Northeastern territories. The strategy seemed to work temporarily, when the Huns stopped to rest and regather their supplies. As they rampaged through Italy, the Huns had sacked and destroyed cities and towns. They had come far too close to Rome for comfort, and Emperor Valentinian III sent out an envoy, consisting of several embassies including Pope Leo, in an attempt to use diplomacy. It was a last-ditch effort, and no one really expected it to work. After all, what use was diplomacy against these barbarians? It was a desperate move, but the emperor was a desperate man. The Romans had tried everything militarily, and nothing was working. The emperor sent out the envoy and crossed his fingers. Maybe a man of God could bring divine intervention, something the Romans sorely needed.

It is hard to picture the scene: a small entourage surrounding a holy old man facing down a massive barbarian army. Pope Leo was admitted to speak with Attila, and somehow managed to convince Attila to turn back. While the transcript was not recorded, all of the envoy's success was attributed to the holy pope. A Christian writer named Prosper of Aquitaine, in writing about the meeting three years later, said, "he [Attila] was so impressed by the presence of the high priest [Leo] that he ordered his army to give up warfare and, after he had promised peace, he departed beyond the Danube."⁶ Although historians are not sure whether Prosper was actually at the meeting, the fact that he wrote about the event only three years after it occurred lends him credibility. Some historians believe that Pope St. Leo used a bribe⁷,

while others hold that the apostles Peter and Paul came down from Heaven and threatened Attila⁶. But whatever the case, whatever the saintly pope said to the Hun, it worked. Attila immediately stopped his invasion. And the entirety of Rome was glad to hear of it. Somehow, St. Leo had convinced the most fearsome warlord in the world to back down, and to negotiate terms for peace with the emperor.

This act of heroism was just one of several near-miraculous actions taken by St. Leo. In 455 AD, just three years later, Rome had been captured by the Vandals, a Germanic tribe, led by their chief Genseric¹. The Vandals plundered Rome for two weeks, but not a single Roman was killed during the sack. This sudden mercy was due to the parlay of St. Leo. Thanks to him, a promise was obtained from the Vandals not to harm the inhabitants of Rome. St. Leo had now saved Rome twice.

However, these two amazing actions are only half the reason St. Leo is called “the Great”. His greatest accomplishment was keeping the Church safe from the many heretics and enemies of Christendom who were doing their best to destroy Christ’s bride. There were many challenges the saintly pope had to combat, and through it all, he brought the Church closer together. By rebuking immoral bishops and clergymen, St. Leo introduced stricter discipline to the clergy. This correction was very important to the leaders of the Church. Pope Leo was informed by Bishop Septimus of Altinum, near Venice, that clergymen who were once followers of Pelagianism were being admitted to receive Communion¹. These clergymen had not explicitly denied their heresy, so St. Leo was quick to put an end to it. He successfully required all of the heretical clergymen to either renounce their heresy and take an Act of Faith, or be excommunicated.

But Pelagianism was not the only heresy the great pope faced. St. Leo also had to deal with exposing a secret society of the followers of Manichaeism in Rome itself; moreover, he sent a letter refuting Priscillianism, which had been growing in Spain. He did his best to establish a closer bond between Rome and the rest of Christendom. St. Leo also had a conflict with St. Hilary, who was at that time the bishop of Arles¹. St. Hilary had claimed that he himself should be the one to consecrate all bishops, and there was a conflict between him and St. Leo, for several bishops had brought complaints

against St. Hilary to St. Leo. St. Hilary went to Rome to defend himself, and eventually, St. Hilary was no longer allowed to consecrate other bishops. The two saintly men held no grudges and no further conflict arose.

If Pope Leo had not strived as he did to keep the Church together, the faith would have been drowned out by the world, and suppressed for years. For this reason, St. Leo's greatest act was not stopping an army, or saving a city, but combating the works of Satan and saving the Church. The clergy especially should pray for Pope St. Leo the Great's help to be more like him. In this challenging time for the church, where nothing is certain, the Catholic faith needs to be the house on a rock, the pillar for the children of God to cling to, as it was then. Any Christian, be he layman or clergyman, should strive to be more like Pope St. Leo the Great. A Great man doesn't have to save cities or stop armies in their tracks, but he may do just that by defending and keeping the faith.

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