

# **Saint Peter And The Papacy**

## **Some thoughts of Saint Leo the Great**

By Saint Leo the Great.

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### Introduction.

Saint Leo's pontificate, 440 to 461, next to that of Saint Gregory the Great, is the most significant and important in Christian antiquity. At a time when the Church was experiencing the greatest obstacles to her progress in consequence of the hastening disintegration of the Western Empire, while the Orient was profoundly agitated over dogmatic controversies, this great pope, with far-seeing sagacity and powerful hand, guided the destiny of the Roman and Universal Church. Leo was a native of Tuscany and his father's name was Quintianus. Our earliest certain historical information about Leo reveals him a deacon of the Roman Church under Pope Saint Celestine I (422-32). Even during this period, he was known outside of Rome. About this time, Saint Cyril of Alexandria appealed to Rome against the pretensions of Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem. During the pontificate of Sixtus III (432-40), Leo was sent to Gaul by Emperor Valentinian III to settle a dispute and bring about a reconciliation between Aëtius, the chief military commander of the province, and the chief magistrate, Albinus. This commission is a proof of the great confidence placed in the clever and able deacon by the Imperial Court. Sixtus III died on 19 August, 440, while Leo was in Gaul, and the latter was chosen his successor. Returning to Rome, Leo was consecrated on 29 September of the same year, and governed the Roman Church for the next twenty-one years.

Leo's chief aim was to sustain the unity of the Church. Not long after his elevation to the Chair of Peter, he saw himself compelled to combat energetically the heresies which seriously threatened church unity even in the West.

The greatly disorganized ecclesiastical condition of certain countries, resulting from national migrations, demanded closer bonds between their episcopate and Rome for the better promotion of ecclesiastical life. In 445, he found it necessary to restrain the unnecessary interference of Saint Hilary of Arles in other dioceses. He sent the bishops of Gaul an edict of Emperor Valentinian III of 8 July, 445, in which the pope's measures concerning Saint Hilary were supported, and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome over the whole Church solemnly recognized. On his return to his bishopric, Hilary sought a reconciliation with the pope. After this, there arose no further difficulties between these two saintly men. Leo transmitted to Ravennius, the new bishop of Arles, for communication to the other bishops of Gaul, his celebrated letter to Flavian of Constantinople on the Incarnation.

In Leo's conception of his duties as supreme pastor, the maintenance of strict ecclesiastical discipline occupied a prominent place. This was particularly important at a time when the continual ravages of the barbarians were introducing disorder into all conditions of life, and the rules of morality were being seriously violated. Leo used his utmost energy in maintaining this discipline, insisted on the exact observance of the ecclesiastical precepts, and did not hesitate to rebuke when

necessary. The primacy of the Roman Church was thus manifested under this pope in the most various and distinct ways. But it was especially in his interposition in the confusion of the Christological quarrels, which then so profoundly agitated Eastern Christendom, that Leo most brilliantly revealed himself the wise, learned, and energetic shepherd of the Church. From his first letter on this subject, written to Eutyches on 1 June, 448, to his last letter written to the new orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, Timotheus Salophaciolus, on 18 August, 460, we cannot but admire the clear, positive, and systematic manner in which Leo, fortified by the primacy of the Holy See, took part in this difficult entanglement.

Eutyches appealed to the pope after he had been excommunicated by Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, because of Eutyches' Monophysite views. The pope, after investigating the disputed question, sent his sublime dogmatic letter to Flavian, concisely setting forth and confirming the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the union of the Divine and human natures in the one Person of Christ. In 449 the council, which was designated by Leo as the "Robber Synod", was held. Flavian and other powerful prelates of the East appealed to the pope. The latter sent urgent letters to Constantinople, particularly to Emperor Theodosius II and Empress Pulcheria, urging them to convene a general council in order to restore peace to the Church. To the same end, he used his influence with the Western emperor, Valentinian III, and his mother Galla Placidia, especially during their visit to Rome in 450. This general council was held in Chalcedon in 451 under Marcian, the successor of Theodosius. It solemnly accepted Leo's dogmatic epistle to Flavian as an expression of the Catholic Faith concerning the Person of Christ. The pope confirmed the decrees of the Council after eliminating the canon, which elevated the Patriarchate of Constantinople, while diminishing the rights of the ancient Oriental patriarchs. On 21 March, 453, Leo issued a circular letter confirming his dogmatic definition. Through the mediation of Bishop Julian of Cos, who was at that time the papal ambassador in Constantinople, the pope tried to protect further ecclesiastical interests in the Orient. He persuaded the new Emperor of Constantinople, Leo I, to remove the heretical and irregular patriarch, Timotheus Ailurus, from the See of Alexandria. A new and orthodox patriarch, Timotheus Salophaciolus, was chosen to fill his place, and received the congratulations of the pope in the last letter which Leo ever sent to the Orient.

In his far-reaching pastoral care of the Universal Church, in the West and in the East, the pope never neglected the domestic interests of the Church at Rome. When Northern Italy had been devastated by Attila, Leo by a personal encounter with the King of the Huns prevented him from marching upon Rome. He went in 452 to Upper Italy, and met Attila in the vicinity of Mantua, obtaining from him the promise that he would withdraw from Italy and negotiate peace with the emperor. The pope also succeeded in obtaining another great favor for the inhabitants of Rome. When in 455 the city was captured by the Vandals under Genseric, although for a fortnight the town had been plundered, Leo's intercession obtained a promise that the city should not be injured and that the lives of the inhabitants should be spared. These incidents show the high moral authority enjoyed by the pope, manifested even in temporal affairs.

Leo was no less active in the spiritual elevation of the Roman congregations, and his sermons, of which ninety-six genuine examples have been preserved, are remarkable for their profundity, clearness of diction, and elevated style. The first five of these, which were delivered on the anniversaries of his consecration, manifest his lofty conception of the dignity of his office, as well as his thorough conviction of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, shown forth in so outspoken and decisive a manner by his whole activity as supreme pastor. Of his letters, which are of great

importance for church history, 143 have come down to us: we also possess thirty, which were sent to him. Leo died on 10 November, 461, and was buried in the vestibule of Saint Peter's on the Vatican Hill. In 1754, Benedict XIV exalted him to the dignity of Doctor of the Church.

### The Papacy – What is it?

The Lord Jesus made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the "rock" of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. [Mt 16:18-19; John 21:15-17.] The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head. This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope.

Simon Peter holds the first place in the college of the Twelve; [Mark 3:16; 9:2; Luke 24:34; 1 Corinth 15:5.] Jesus entrusted a unique mission to him. Through a revelation from the Father, Peter had confessed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Our Lord then declared to him: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." [Mt 16:18] Christ, the "living Stone", [1 Peter 2:4.] thus assures his Church, built on Peter, of victory over the powers of death. Because of the faith he confessed Peter will remain the unshakable rock of the Church. His mission will be to keep this faith from every lapse and to strengthen his brothers in it. [Luke 22:32.]

Some people wish to maintain that Our Lord was opposed to 'organized religion'. This is certainly not so. Far from having been hostile to the Temple, where Jesus gave the essential part of his teaching, Jesus was willing to pay the Temple-tax, associating with him Peter, whom he had just made the foundation of his future Church. [Mt 8:4; 16:18; 17:24-27; Luke 17:14; John 4:22; 18:20.] He even identified himself with the Temple by presenting himself as God's definitive dwelling-place among men. [John 2:21; Mt 12:6.] Therefore his being put to bodily death [John 2:18-22.] presaged the destruction of the Temple, which would manifest the dawning of a new age in the history of salvation: "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. [John 4:21; John 4:23-24; Mt 27:5; Heb 9:11; Rev 21:22.] It would be in spirit and truth but within the 'community' or 'Ecclesia' built by Jesus Himself on Saint Peter.

Moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit and drawn by the Father, we, as Catholics, believe in Jesus and confess: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' [Mt 16:16.] On the rock of this faith confessed by Saint Peter, Christ built his Church. [Mt 16:18; and see the sermons of Saint Leo the Great.]

### Saint Leo's Sermons. (Some Extracts.)

#### Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 4, 3.

"The gates of hell will not prevail over this [Peter's] confession, the chains of death will not bind it: for these words are words of life. And as they raise to heaven those who confess them, they plunge into hell those who deny them. For this reason, it is said to blessed Peter: I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. And whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

"The right to exercise this power passed also to the other apostles and the institution arising from this decision extended to all the leaders of the Church; but it is not in vain that what is intended for all is confided to one man. For this power is entrusted to Peter in this singular fashion because the form of Peter is intended for all those who rule the Church. Peter's privilege is therefore everywhere

present where a judgment is rendered in virtue of his equity. Nor is either the severity or the leniency too great where nothing is bound, nothing loosed, but what blessed Peter would have bound or loosed. And when Jesus' passion approached, which would shake the constancy of all the disciples, he said 'Simon, Simon, behold Satan has asked for you all, that he may sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you (singular), that your (singular) faith may not fail. And you (singular), when you shall have turned back, strengthen your (singular) brothers,' (Luke 22:31) 'lest you all enter into temptation' (Luke 22:46). The danger of the temptation to fear was common to all the apostles, and they all had like need of the aid of divine protection, for the devil desired to frighten and bring about the fall of all of them. Nevertheless, the Lord has a special concern for Peter, and prays specifically for Peter's faith, as if the future condition of the others would be more secure if the soul of the leader was not vanquished. Therefore in Peter the strength of all is confirmed, and the aid of divine grace is so ordered that the steadfastness, which is given to Peter by Christ, is conferred on the apostles through Peter."

Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 51, 1.

Saint Peter's confession shown to lead up to the Transfiguration.

"The Gospel lesson, dearly-beloved, which has reached the inner hearing of our minds through our bodily ears, calls us to the understanding of a great mystery, to which we shall by the help of God's grace the better attain, if we turn our attention to what is narrated just before.

"The Savior of mankind, Jesus Christ, in founding that faith, which recalls the wicked to righteousness and the dead to life, used to instruct His disciples by admonitory teaching and by miraculous acts to the end that He, the Christ, might be believed to be at once the Only-begotten of God and the Son of Man. For the one without the other was of no avail to salvation, and it was equally dangerous to have believed the Lord Jesus Christ to be either only God without manhood, or only man without Godhead, since both had equally to be confessed, because just as true manhood existed in His Godhead, so true Godhead existed in His Manhood. To strengthen, therefore, their most wholesome knowledge of this belief, the Lord had asked His disciples, among the various opinions of others, what they themselves believed, or thought about Him: whereat the Apostle Peter, by the revelation of the most High Father passing beyond things corporeal and surmounting things human by the eyes of his mind, saw Him to be Son of the living God, and acknowledged the glory of the Godhead, because he looked not at the substance of His flesh and blood alone; and with this lofty faith Christ was so well pleased that he received the fullness of blessing, and was endued with the holy firmness of the inviolable Rock on which the Church should be built and conquer the gates of hell and the laws of death, so that, in loosing or binding the petitions of any whatsoever, only that should be ratified in heaven which had been settled by the judgment of Peter."

Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 62, 2.

The Creed takes up Saint Peter's confession as the fundamental doctrine of the Church.

"In that rule of Faith, dearly-beloved, which we have received in the very beginning of the Creed, on the authority of apostolic teaching, we acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we call the only Son of God the Father Almighty, to be also born of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Ghost. Nor do we reject His Majesty when we express our belief in His crucifixion, death, and resurrection on the third day. For all that is God's and all that is Man's are simultaneously fulfilled by His Manhood and His Godhead, so that in virtue of the union of the Possible with the Impossible, His power cannot be affected by His weakness, nor His weakness overcome by His power. And rightly was the blessed

Apostle Peter praised for confessing this union, who when the Lord was inquiring what the disciples knew of Him, quickly anticipated the rest and said, "You are Christ, the Son of the living God." And this assuredly he saw, not by the revelation of flesh or blood, which might have hindered his inner sight, but by the very Spirit of the Father working in his believing heart, that in preparation for ruling the whole Church he might first learn what he would have to teach, and for the solidification of the Faith, which he was destined to preach, might receive the assurance, 'You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'

"The strength, therefore, of the Christian Faith, which, built upon an impregnable rock, fears not the gates of death, acknowledges the one Lord Jesus Christ to be both true God and true Man, believing Him likewise to be the Virgin's Son, Who is His Mother's Creator; born also at the end of the ages, though He is the Creator of time: Lord of all power, and yet one of mortal stock: ignorant of sin, and yet sacrificed for sinners after the likeness of sinful flesh."

Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 83, 3

"When Jesus' passion approached, which would shake the constancy of all the disciples, he said Simon, 'Simon, behold Satan has asked for you all, that he may sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you (singular), that your (singular) faith may not fail. And you, (singular) when you shall have turned back, strengthen your (singular) brothers,' (Luke 22:32) 'lest you enter into temptation' (Luke 22:40). The danger of the temptation to fear was common to all the apostles, and they all had like need of the aid of divine protection, for the devil desired to frighten and bring about the fall of all of them. Nevertheless, the Lord has a special concern for Peter, and prays specifically for Peter's faith, as if the future condition of the others would be more secure if the soul of the leader was not vanquished. Therefore, in Peter, the strength of all is confirmed, and the aid of divine grace is so ordered that the steadfastness, which is given to Peter by Christ, is conferred on the apostles through Peter. For after his resurrection, the Lord, who had conferred the keys of the Kingdom upon Saint Peter, responds to the threefold confession of divine love by saying three times, with mystical intent: 'Feed my sheep'. And now this holy pastor certainly does just this and obeys the Lord's command by strengthening us with his exhortations and praying for us unceasingly so that no temptation will overcome us. But if, as we must believe, he extends his merciful care to the whole people of God everywhere, how much more does he deign to offer his aid to us his children, among whom he reposes upon a sacred bower of a blessed sleep, in the very flesh with which he ruled us? And so, beloved, since we see such a great aid divinely instituted for us, it is right and just for us to rejoice in the merits and the dignity of our leader, giving thanks to the everlasting King and Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ, that he has given such power to him whom he set over the Church, to the praise and glory of his name, to whom be honor and glory in a world without end. Amen."

Saint Leo's 'Third sermon' on the Third anniversary of his elevation to the Pontificate. (Sermon number 3).

'Although, therefore, dearly beloved, we be found both weak and slothful in fulfilling the duties of our office, because, whatever devoted and vigorous action we desire to do, we are hindered by the frailty of our very condition; yet having the unceasing propitiation of the Almighty and perpetual Priest, who being like us and yet equal with the Father, brought down His Godhead even to things human, and raised His Manhood even to things Divine, we worthily and piously rejoice over His

dispensation, whereby, though He has delegated the care of His sheep to many shepherds, yet He has not Himself abandoned the guardianship of His beloved flock.

‘And from His overruling and eternal protection we have received the support of the Apostles’ aid also, which assuredly does not cease from its operation: and the strength of the foundation, on which the whole superstructure of the Church is reared, is not weakened by the weight of the temple that rests upon it.

‘For the solidity of that faith which was praised in the chief of the Apostles is perpetual: and as that remains which Peter believed in Christ, so that remains which Christ instituted in Peter. For when, as has been read in the Gospel lesson, the Lord had asked the disciples whom they believed Him to be amid the various opinions that were held, and the blessed Peter had replied, saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” the Lord says, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, because flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but My Father, which is in heaven. And I say to you, that you are Peter, and upon this rock will I build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever you shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth, shall be loosed also in heaven (Saint Matthew 16: 16-19)”

‘The dispensation of Truth therefore abides, and the blessed Peter persevering in the strength of the Rock, which he has received, has not abandoned the helm of the Church, which he undertook. For he was ordained before the rest in such a way that from his being called the Rock, from his being pronounced the Foundation, from his being constituted the Doorkeeper of the kingdom of heaven, from his being set as the Umpire to bind and to loose, whose judgments shall retain their validity in heaven, from all these mystical titles we might know the nature of his association with Christ. And still to-day he more fully and effectually performs what is entrusted to him, and carries out every part of his duty and charge in Him and with Him, through Whom he has been glorified. And so, if anything is rightly done and rightly decreed by us, if anything is won from the mercy of God by our daily supplications, it is of his work and merits whose power lives and whose authority prevails in his See.

‘For this, dearly-beloved, was gained by that confession, which, inspired in the Apostle’s heart by God the Father, transcended all the uncertainty of human opinions, and was endued with the firmness of a rock, which no assaults could shake. For throughout the Church Peter daily says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and every tongue which confesses the Lord, accepts the instruction his voice conveys. This Faith conquers the devil, and breaks the bonds of his prisoners. It uproots us from this earth and plants us in heaven, and the gates of Hades cannot prevail against it. For with such solidity is it endued by God that the depravity of heretics cannot mar it nor the unbelief of the heathen overcome it.

‘And so, dearly beloved, with reasonable obedience we celebrate to-day’s festival by such methods, that in my humble person he may be recognized and honored, in whom abides the care of all the shepherds, together with the charge of the sheep commended to him, and whose dignity is not abated even in so unworthy an heir.’

St Leo concludes:

‘And hence the presence of my venerable brothers and fellow-priests, so much desired and valued by me, will be the more sacred and precious, if they will transfer the chief honor of this service in which they have deigned to take part to him whom they know to be not only the patron of this see,

but also the primate of all bishops. When therefore we utter our exhortations in your ears, holy brethren, believe that he is speaking whose representative we are: because it is his warning that we give, nothing else but his teaching that we preach, beseeching you to "gird up the loins of your mind (1 Peter 1:13)," and lead a chaste and sober life in the fear of God, and not to let your mind forget his supremacy and consent to the lusts of the flesh. Short and fleeting are the joys of this world's pleasures which endeavor to turn aside from the path of life those who are called to eternity. The faithful and religious spirit, therefore, must desire the things which are heavenly, and being eager for the Divine promises, lift itself to the love of the incorruptible Good and the hope of the true Light. But be sure, dearly-beloved, that your labor, whereby you resist vices and fight against carnal desires, is pleasing and precious in God's sight, and in God's mercy will profit not only yourselves but me also, because the zealous pastor makes his boast of the progress of the Lord's flock.

"For ye are my crown and joy (1 Thessalonians 2:20)," as the Apostle says, if your faith, which from the beginning of the Gospel has been preached in all the world has continued in love and holiness. For though the whole Church, which is in all the world, ought to abound in all virtues, yet you especially, above all people, it becomes to excel in deeds of piety, because founded as you are on the very citadel of the Apostolic Rock, not only has our Lord Jesus Christ redeemed you in common with all men, but the blessed Apostle Peter has instructed you far beyond all men. Through the same Christ our Lord."

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