

Despite ill health, Gregory made mark

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

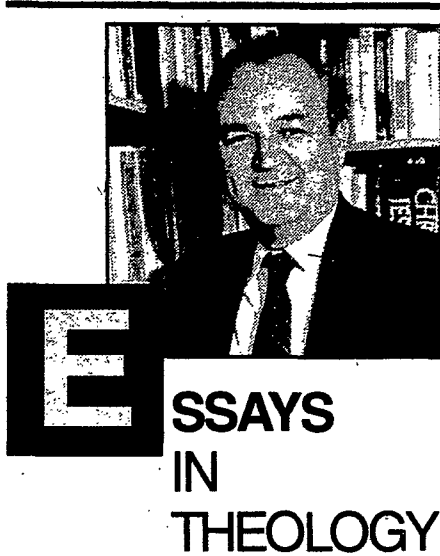
St. Gregory the Great (feast day, Sept. 3) was one of the most influential popes in church history and the first to enter the papacy with a monastic background.

Born into a wealthy aristocratic family with a distinguished lineage (he was related by blood to two previous popes), Gregory at first served as prefect of the city of Rome. But after his father's death and his widowed mother's entrance into religious life, Gregory donated his fortune to the poor, converted his family mansion into a monastery, and joined its original community of monks.

He was later called away from his rigorous cloistered life by the pope. Ordained a deacon, he was subsequently sent to the imperial court at Constantinople as papal representative. While in service there, he turned his official residence into a small monastic house and once again lived as a monk.

After being recalled to Rome seven years later, Gregory resumed his monastic life while functioning as a confidential adviser to the pope.

Although still only a junior deacon, Gregory was unanimously elected pope upon the death of Pelagius II in 540. At first he did everything he could to nullify the election, because he did not wish to leave the contemplative life. He even wrote to the emperor to ask



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him to withhold his consent. But that didn't work, and Gregory was consecrated under protest.

Because of the general breakdown of civil order at the time, much of the responsibility for public administration and social services fell by default to the papacy. In order to address an immediate crisis created by a plague, the newly elected pope organized the distribution of food and other necessities throughout the city of Rome.

Gregory secured the necessary financial resources by reorganizing the management of lands owned by the Holy See within and outside Italy, thereby laying the foundation for the future Papal States.

He also made peace with the Lombards who had been threatening Rome and whom he hoped one day to convert to Catholicism, but when a truce was broken and an army descended on the city, the pope organized the defense and saved Rome from capture.

Gregory was no less engaged in the Western Church's internal affairs. He established guidelines for the election and conduct of bishops, and was insistent on the primacy of the Roman see.

His relations with the East were more difficult because Constantinople's bishop insisted on using the title "ecumenical patriarch" that had been granted by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Gregory viewed the title as prejudicial to papal supremacy. The controversy persisted throughout his pontificate.

Gregory's major achievements, however, were in the pastoral and spiritual realms. In 596 he sent the prior of his Roman monastery, Augustine (later known as Augustine of Canterbury, the first archbishop of that historic see), to England with 40 monks to evangelize that territory. Five years later he sent additional missionaries under the leadership of Melitius and Paulinus, who eventually were named bishops of London and York.

Gregory was also a prolific writer, stronger on the practical side than the theoretical. His works exercised an enormous influence well into the Middle Ages and beyond.

Among his most important writings

on the Bible were his moral reflections on Job (which influenced the subsequent development of moral and ascetical theology for centuries), his Forty Homilies on the Gospels, and various homilies on other Old Testament works.

But his most enduring writings were the Dialogues, which describe the miraculous deeds of Italian saints, especially St. Benedict, and the Pastoral Rule. The latter was composed for bishops, setting out a vision of pastoral care that would continue to apply even today: (1) the pastor should have the capacity and the readiness to adapt to the needs of individuals; (2) he should set a personal example to support his teaching and preaching; and (3) he should maintain a balance in his ministry between the contemplative life and service to those in need.

What is remarkable is that Gregory accomplished all that he did while in an almost constant state of ill health. Afflicted with gout, he was unable to walk by the time of his death.

There is also an important lesson surrounding his death. Rome was threatened with yet another siege. With its food supply cut off, the city was again beset with famine. The Romans turned in exasperation on the man who had done so much for them as pope. And yet, immediately after his death, he was popularly acclaimed as a saint.

Thus are the vicissitudes of the human spirit.

Faith needs to be tried and tested

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 13:22-30; (R1) Isaiah 66:18-21; (R2) Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13.

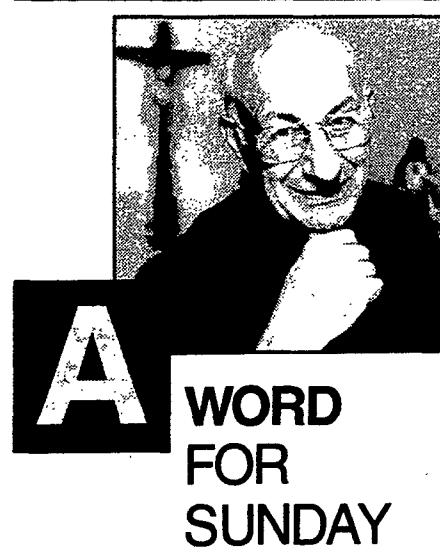
The theme of Sunday's readings is the universality of salvation — a theme dear to St. Paul and to his disciple Luke.

As our Lord was heading toward Jerusalem, teaching in cities and towns, someone asked Him, "Lord, are there few in number who are to be saved?"

The questioner was not talking about himself. He was a Jew and had no doubt about his salvation — so he thought.

What he was talking about was the Gentiles. Would many of the Gentiles be saved? That was his question.

Our Lord shocked him with His answer. He said, in effect, "Don't be so cocksure about yourself. It will not be enough to be a Jew to be saved. Many will say, 'We ate and drank, in your company. You taught in our streets.' But the Lord will say, 'I do not know where you come from. Away from me, you evildoers.'"



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SUNDAY

And, He concluded, "Pagans from the east and the west, from the north and the south who have made an effort to respond to the divine call will also gain salvation. Some who are last will be first and some who are first will be last — the pagans, called last, will be first; and the Jews called first, will be last."

In a nutshell, what our Lord was say-

ing was that belonging is not enough for salvation; it is in doing. Faith without good works is dead. So Jesus said: "Try to come in through the narrow door." The Greek word for "try" means to struggle, to agonize, to strive.

Ken had to teach the law of the pendulum to a college class. This law of physics states that a pendulum can never return to a point higher than the point from which it is released. Friction and gravity will cause it to fall short of the release point. Each time it swings, the arc gets smaller and smaller until it finally comes to rest.

Ken used all kinds of diagrams and models to teach the class the law. When he had finished, he asked the class if they believed in the law. All the students raised their hands.

Ken wasn't through, however. He asked one of the students to sit in a chair placed against the wall. He had suspended a 250-pound ball from the ceiling. He brought the ball right up to the student's nose and said, "If the law of the pendulum is true, when I release this mass of metal, it will swing across the room and return short of where I

am holding it now. It won't touch your nose." Then Ken asked the student, "Do you believe this law is true?"

The student uttered a weak "yes."

Ken released the pendulum. At the far end of its arc it paused momentarily and then started back. As it came toward the student, he jumped out of the chair for dear life. Ken stepped around the still-swinging pendulum and asked the class, "Does he really believe in the law of the pendulum?" The class answered "no" in unison.

The student understood the law, but was unwilling to trust his nose to it.

Another student volunteered to sit in the chair. When the pendulum swung away from him and back, his face contorted with fear, but he stayed still even though it stopped an inch from his nose. His faith in the law was strengthened. The next time the pendulum swung back, he didn't even blink.

Faith needs to be tested. Many say we believe, but do we? Do we endure our trials as God's discipline? Does God's discipline bring us the fruit of joy and strengthen our drooping hands and our weak knees?

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